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ABSTRACT

"Performances of Posterity: Theatre, Archives and Cultural Regulation in Modern India," excavates processes of cultural preservation and appropriation in the context of Indian theatre and performance. This inquiry is regionally and linguistically centered in Maharashtra in Western India, and I primarily work with materials in Marathi. I argue that in the post-independence (post-1947) decades, theatre emerged as a crucial, but largely understudied, archival site for the preservation of subaltern art forms, specifically *tamasha* and *lavani*. *Tamasha* is a composite multi-part entertainment program, usually performed in towns and villages on temporary stages and tents. One of the standard elements of *tamasha* is *lavani* – a genre of (usually erotic) poetry, music and dance, mainly composed by men and performed by women. Both *tamasha* and *lavani* are popular "folk" forms local to Maharashtra, and have historically been the purview of artists from so-called lower and untouchable castes.

Through my dissertation, I track how the preservation of *tamasha,* as a form of cultural heritage, became an increasingly contentious matter of public concern in the latter half of the 20th century, which found its most vital articulation on urban proscenium stages. I delineate the ways that diverse discourses – ranging from modernity, heteropatriarchy, nationalism and anticolonialism, to right-wing fundamentalism, leftist mass mobilization, feminist interventions and anti-caste resistance – were marshalled within this preservatory paradigm, and the complex ways in which questions of caste, class, gender, and sexuality were negotiated in this process. From the late-1950s onwards, a whole new genre of plays emerged that were intended, performed, and received as critical interventions into the existing historiography of *tamasha* and *lavani*. I describe this genre as *archival performances*: these are plays that seek to undertake some kind of archival project, and where performance is both the form and the content of the work. These *archival performances* are ephemeral

and dynamic, in that they are transient, live performance events; yet they have tangible and enduring consequences on how minoritarian and subaltern art forms are historicized, legitimized, and accessed within the public sphere. Through extensive archival and ethnographic research, I have assembled a corpus of such plays, written primarily in Marathi between 1950-2015, that I analyze in my dissertation.

"Performances of Posterity" follows a chronological arc. I begin in the 1940s-1950s, when *tamasha* preservation started to be framed as a law-and-order problem. Publicly decried for being excessively obscene, and covertly targeted for being seditious, *tamasha* was officially censored under the Police Act from 1954 onwards. I argue that in the *tamasha* case, censorship was posited as a preservatory, rather than prohibitive, force and introduced a new kind of remedial discourse around this art form. Chapter 2 then traces the critical role of theatre in executing and expanding this censorial vision, through a reading of Vasant Sabnis' *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* (Fulfill My Desires, 1965). This play reframed the preservation and reform of *tamasha* as a dramaturgical project and pioneered the gentrification of *tamasha* into a respectable, middle-class theatrical genre. In excavating and assessing the profound impact that this landmark play had on the historiography of *tamasha,* I emphasize the critical, if ambivalent, role of humor and parody in perpetuating such processes of cultural appropriation.

Chapter 3 focuses on the resistance against such hegemonic processes, bringing together three plays that stage genealogies of caste-based appropriation of *tamasha*: Datta Bhagat's *Avarta* (Vortex, 1976), Rustom Achalkhamb's *Kaifiyat* (An Account, 1981), and Yogiraj Waghmare's *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi* (That Which Never Happened, 1978). I interrogate how performance's potential for disappearance is used as a discursive and dramatic device within these texts. Chapter 4 centers on the figure of the female *lavani* dancer, who is interpellated as subject, object and metaphor in the

discourse of *tamasha* preservation. Since *tamasha* and *lavani* are routinely denigrated as being vulgar and obscene, the trope of the dancing girl is often invoked to signify the moral turpitude of these art forms; at the same time, the dancing girl is also mobilized as the ever-fertile site of moral reform, who can be literally and figuratively molded to suit hegemonic projects of cultural conservation. Here I pair two documentary plays, *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* (Her Mother's Story, 1995) and *Sangeet Bari* (2015) that attempt to present a more "real" picture of the *lavani* dancer. The dissertation concludes with an epilogue that reflects on the scope and impact of such archival performances vis-à-vis institutionalized documentary practices and durable archives dedicated to performance in India today.

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach focused on the relationship between textual cultures, aesthetic forms and material conditions, I illustrate how the study of performance offers new insights into the myriad historical, economic, sociopolitical and cultural complexities of everyday life in modern India. In recent years, there has been a distinct archival turn in the study of Indian theatre and performance; "Performances of Posterity" is among the first to offer a critical historical inquiry into the co-imbrication of performance practice and archival praxis in India. Tracing such a dialogic relationship between performance and archive, I suggest, not only sheds new light on a relatively under-theorized aspect of Indian theatre practice, but also illuminates how performance operates as an essential epistemological category, creating ways of knowing and remembering that exceed the logic of the archive. In centering the archival discourse around *tamasha* and *lavani*, particularly as it manifests within a theatrical idiom, this dissertation reflects more broadly on ruptures between collaboration and appropriation, documentation and museumization, memory and records, performance and archives.

PROLOGUE

Intakes from the Field

The initial stirrings of this dissertation research began with a joke in 2010, while I was employed as an ad-hoc amateur archivist with the India Theatre Forum (ITF), a formerly vibrant, but now inoperative, network of theatre practitioners from across the country. In the midst of the "Arts Management Meet" in January 2010, one of many such large gatherings of theatre artists routinely convened by the ITF, the conversation turned to the proposed *Kala Kalyana* scheme, one of our flagship initiatives. Literally translating to "Welfare for Art," *Kala Kalyana* was envisioned as a robust insurance and social security scheme for artists, especially those working in unorganized, non-urban, and economically precarious professional contexts. Although the scheme itself was squarely focused on the livelihood and survival of disenfranchised artists, the conversation constantly meandered towards abstract anxieties about the liveliness and survival of art, especially, popular and "folk" forms. Frustrated with this shift in register, one my colleagues an accomplished puppeteer, quipped: "Why is it always 'this form is dying and that form is dying'? Have they all simultaneously contracted the Bubonic plague or something?" While the room burst into laughter at such bizarre anthropomorphization, this sardonic remark captured a pervasive but unstated predicament: that within the contemporary Indian theatrical context, discourses around artistic endurance – whether conceived as embodied longevity or as archival durability – usually coalesce and falter around the trope of the "dying art," which, paradoxically, often obfuscates issues of subsistence and survival of the artists who perform these art forms.

The looming specter of the "dying art" continued to haunt various theatre archiving and documentation projects I collaborated on over the years, albeit to different degrees. This dissertation

is an attempt to understand this haunting historically and conceptually, engaging it within the specific cultural and performative context of modern Maharashtra. Exploring the myriad and complex ways in which performance practice and archival praxis are co-constituted, I hope, will not only shed light on a relatively under-theorized aspect of modern Indian theatre and performance, but also perhaps allow for a new reckoning with ghosts of so many abandoned, forsaken and unfinished experiments to get performance on the record.

INTRODUCTION

Lifted from the vast repositories of cheaply published, occasionally performed and perhaps eagerly spectated play texts in Marathi that have fallen below the radar of scholarly scrutiny, the following excerpt from a 1988 play titled *Kshan Aala Bhagyacha* ("Moment of Fate") by Mohan Vishwasrao constellates the central provocations of this dissertation:

> Sadoba: Wow. Just excellent. This dialogue of yours is really something isn't it! Now imagine if all [female] artists started fantasizing about domestic bliss like you, then *tamasha* would stand no chance of survival, would it?
>
> Hansa: Why? Why can't you be married and also devote yourself to your art? These days even upper-class, high society women dabble in the arts, that too with their heads held high! They even take dance lessons…
>
> Sadoba: Yes that may be, but they don't dance in *tamashas*!
>
> Hansa: Why don't they? *Loknatya* [folk theatre] is simply a reformed version of *tamasha*…Nowadays times have changed, things have improved. We too need to leave the old ways behind us. We must uplift the status of our art![1]

Presented here *in medias res* as a floating piece of dialogue devoid of any dramatic context, this fragment, when read closely, nonetheless signals several generative lines of inquiry. The text tells us that the issue at stake is the very survival of *tamasha* – among the oldest, and most vibrant popular forms of performance in the Maharashtra region of Western India. We don't fully know why it is under threat, though we may glean its preservation bears some connection to the marital status of [female] artists. The last few lines draw us into a remedial discourse around this art form: it appears that the reform movement is both recent and ongoing, and that the touchstone for these improvements are the avocations of "upper-class, high society" women. The category of the folk too appears to lend a certain kind of traction to this discourse. Hansa's final call to action suggests that artists like her are not initiators of these reforms, but they are interpellated by them, and perhaps feel

[1] Mohan Vishwasrao, *Kshan Aala Bhagyacha* (Mumbai: Lalit Natya Prakashan, 1988), 36.

a sense of responsibility in bringing these efforts to fruition. Zooming out from the text to ponder over context, we may ask: What is the motivation behind this writing? Who is the imagined audience of this play? How does it fit into the wider dramatic landscape? And what do we make of the ambient meta-theatricality of it all?

This dissertation seeks to contextualize and explicate the links between these seemingly disparate lines of inquiry, by tracking how the "preservation" of popular, subaltern forms like *tamasha* (and the associated art form of *lavani*) emerged as a predominant moral and aesthetic concern for theatre praxis in India, specifically on Marathi stages, from the late-1940s onwards. *Tamasha* is a multi-part entertainment program, usually performed in towns and villages on temporary stages and tents. One of the standard elements of tamasha is *lavani* – a genre of (usually erotic) poetry, music, and dance, mainly composed by men and performed by women. Both *tamasha* and *lavani* are popular "folk"' forms local to Maharashtra and have historically been the purview of artists from so-called lower and untouchable castes.

I argue that in the post-independence decades, theatre was imagined and mobilized as a crucial, but hitherto largely understudied, archival site for the preservation of "folk" forms like *tamasha* and *lavani*. I illustrate how in such dynamic archival projects, the lines between preservation, restoration, redaction, and appropriation are blurry, and often, intentionally obfuscated. In the chapters that follow, I trace the trajectory through which the preservation of *tamasha*, as a form of cultural heritage, became an increasingly contentious matter of public concern in the latter half of the 20th century, which found its most vital articulation on urban proscenium stages. Theatre emerged as both a metonym and a battleground for the reification of, and resistance against, hegemonic cultural power. I delineate the ways that diverse discourses – ranging from modernity, heteropatriarchy, nationalism and anticolonialism, to right-wing fundamentalism, leftist mass

mobilization, feminist interventions and anti-caste resistance – were marshalled within this preservatory paradigm, and the complex ways in which questions of caste, class, gender, and sexuality were negotiated in this process. From the late-1950s onwards, a whole new genre of plays emerged that were intended, performed, and received as critical interventions into the existing historiography of *tamasha* and *lavani*. I describe this genre as *archival performances*: these are plays that seek to undertake some kind of archival project, and where performance is both the form and the content of the work. These *archival performances* are ephemeral and dynamic, in that they are transient, live performance events; yet they have tangible and enduring consequences on how minoritarian and subaltern art forms are historicized, legitimized, and accessed within the public sphere. Through extensive archival and ethnographic research, I have assembled a corpus of such plays, written primarily in Marathi between 1950-2015, that I analyze in my dissertation.

Tracing such a dialogic relationship between performance and archive, I suggest, not only sheds new light on a relatively under-theorized aspect of theatre practice in India, but also illuminates how performance operates as an essential epistemological category, as a "complement, alternative, supplement and critique of inscribed texts," creating ways of knowing and remembering that exceed the logic of the archive.[2] In centering the archival discourse around *tamasha* and *lavani*, particularly as it manifests within a theatrical idiom, this dissertation reflects more broadly on ruptures between collaboration and appropriation, documentation and museumization, memory and records, performance and archives.

Tamasha: History and Historiography

[2] Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," *Communication Monographs* 58 (June 1991): 191.

Tamasha, as Namdev Vhatkar puts it, is "a deeply maligned art form."[3] Conventionally considered to be a low form of mass entertainment, *tamasha* is routinely castigated for being vulgar, obscene and morally decrepit. At the same time, it is also hailed as the most popular and vibrant "folk art" of Maharashtra, and celebrated as a symbol of authentic Marathi culture. To make sense of this apparent paradox, it is essential to survey the historical transformations in the contexts and representation of *tamasha* performance, as I do below, tracking it alongside the emergence of the folk as an overdetermined category in the second half of the 20th century, as I do in the next section.

The word *tamasha* is used colloquially in Hindi, Marathi and other Indic languages to mean some sort of spectacle. In common parlance, this word can have positive connotations (akin to fun, sport, playfulness) or negative ones (chaos, commotion, mayhem) depending on the context. In artistic terms, *tamasha* refers specifically to the popular, secular performance form local to the Maharashtra region. There are vastly varying accounts of when and how this form first originated; some scholars like V.K. Joshi trace its roots back to the 7th century, others like Vinayak Bhave and Prabhodhankar Thackeray locate its provenance amidst the cultural efflorescence of the 13th century, while many others, such as M.V. Dhond and Namdev Vhatkar contend that *tamasha* evolved into an independent art form in the 17th century.[4] Despite these differences about its origins, there seems to be a general consensus that *tamasha* evinces some links – etymologically and historically – to the Muslim rule over the Deccan region of Western India in the 17th century. Shailaja Paik observes that as a form of entertainment, *tamasha* is "evidence of the interconnections between Marathi, Persian, and Arab cultures, languages, and societies since the medieval period."[5] These interconnections are

[3] Namdev Vhatkar, *Marathichi Lokkala Tamasha* (Kolhapur: Chandrakant Shetye, 1951), 9.
[4] For a concise summary of these positions see Rustum Achalkhamb, *Tamasha Lokarangbhumi* (Pune: Sugava, 2006).
[5] Paik, Shailaja. "Mangala Bansode and the Social Life of Tamasha: Caste, Sexuality, and Discrimination in Modern Maharashtra," *Biography* 40, no. 1 (2017): 172.

manifest in the fact that *tamasha* artists can be Hindu or Muslim; at the same time, *tamasha* and *lavani* have been primarily performed and sustained over the centuries by artists from nomadic tribes, lower-caste and Dalit communities.[6]

Like any other popular art form, *tamasha* too has changed and adapted in accordance with the various social, political and economic transformations in the region over the last three centuries. While much of *tamasha* performance tends to be improvisatory, the structure as a whole is composed of some standard elements. It conventionally begins with the *gan*, an invocation of Lord Ganesh, followed by the *gavalan* (a flirtatious, musical repartee between Lord Krishna, his sidekick, and milkmaids). The third component is the *batavani*, a commentary offered by two narrators, usually introducing the dramatic skit or *vag* to follow. Another crucial element of *tamasha* is *lavani*, a genre of (usually erotic) music, song and dance, usually performed by women. *Lavani* is also an independent art form in own right, and has other contexts for performance outside of *tamasha* as well.[7]

There are several scholarly accounts charting the transformations in the content and contexts of *tamasha* performance as it first flourished under the Mughal rule, originating perhaps as a form of entertainment for soldiers in the Mughal army; it was then patronized by the Hindu Maratha

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[6] Achalkhamb, *Tamasha*, 9.

[7] Since the late 1800s, there have been two major avenues for the performance of *lavani*: i) *Dholki-phad tamasha* which are traveling groups that perform a variety entertainment program, that includes, among other things, a *lavani*; ii) *Sangeet bari* performances. See Sharmila Rege, "The Hegemonic Appropriation of Sexuality: The case of the *lavani* performers of Maharashtra," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 29, nos. 1-2 (1995): 29. The 20th century witnessed the rise of *kala pathak* troupes who were engaged in social and political propaganda and used *lavani* towards this end. See V.K. Joshi, *Loknatyachi Parampara* (Pune: Thokal Prakashan, 1961), 4. Other "lesser-known traditions" include the *Utpat-Mandali* where the "men of Pandharpur and some of its outlying areas perform *lavanis* and other songs, primarily during the Holi Festival," and *Nariday Kitankars*, devotional singers whose repertoire includes *lavani*. See Rao, Kristin Olson, "The Lavani of Maharashtra: A Regional Genre of Indian Popular Music," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1985), 139, 154. In contemporary Maharashtra, the most popular avenues for *lavani* are films and "Banner Shows:" three-hour long shows of *lavani* performance interspersed with comedy acts, performed in commercial urban auditoria.

rulers under the reign of the Peshwas in the 18th and 19th centuries, which is when devotional elements like the invocation to Lord Ganesh were incorporated into the form; after the decline in royal patronage following the fall of the Maratha empire, *tamasha* had a new incarnation as a primarily rural form of entertainment, now patronized by the rural elite, such as village headmen, landlords, moneylenders and so on; it also had something of an urban "renaissance" in cities like Mumbai and Kolhapur from the early 1900s with the involvement of prominent upper-caste artists.[8] The mobilization of *tamasha* as a political genre from the 19th century onwards, too has been extensively documented. I elaborate on this history in some detail here, as it provides direct context for the chapters that follow.

In the mid-19th century, the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society for the Seekers of Truth) founded by the social reformer and anti-caste activist Jotiba Phule (1827-1890), adapted the *tamasha* into a new politicized genre called the *jalsa*. The *satyashodhak jalsa* incorporated many of the standard elements of *tamasha,* though these were now directed towards fostering social and political awareness, particularly among the illiterate working class populace. The primary focus of these *jalsas* was not entertainment, but mass edification, and the performances, which usually travelled from village to village, touched upon issues such as social reform, superstition, the eradication of untouchability, the tyranny of money-lenders and priests, and the importance of education.[9] The style of the *tamasha* form was adapted to reflect these concerns; for instance, the conventional erotic *lavani* was replaced by songs praising science and education and condemning practices like dowry, enforced widowhood, and so on.[10] The *jalsa* form was further adapted by the anti-caste movements

[8] An overview of this history can be found in several Marathi sources such as Vhatkar, *Marathichi*; Achalkhamb, *Tamasha;* P.L. Jaitapkar, *Tamashakala,* (Aurangabad: Sahitya Seva Prakashan, 1988). For an English source, see Tevia Abrams, "Tamasha: People's Theatre of Maharashtra State, India, " (PhD diss. Michigan State University, 1974).
[9] Sambhaji Kharat, *Mahatma Phule ani Satyashodhak Jalse*, (Aurangabad: Sahitya Seva Prakashan, 1990).
[10] Sharmila Rege, "Understanding Popular Culture: The *Satyashodhak* and *Ganesh Mela* in

led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the 20th century. These *ambedkari jalsas* also incorporated many standard elements of *tamasha*, and modified them to serve the specific political aims of the Dalit movement. The *gan* at the beginning, for instance, was often an invocation of Ambedkar (or "Bhimrao") rather than a religious deity. As Bhimrao Kardak, a prominent activist-performer recounts, these *jalsas* were wielded as a "weapon" for the uplift of the so-called untouchable castes, to keep them apprised of "the social transformations that were in process under the leadership of Ambedkar and provide constant updates on various events as they unfolded from one moment to the next, conveyed in their rural dialect, using an entertaining medium (i.e. *tamasha*)."[11] During the national movement for independence from colonial rule, and in the decade that followed, many governmental and political organizations had dedicated cultural squads or *kala pathaks* that performed *tamashas* targeting specific sociopolitical issues. I elaborate on impact and afterlives of these various genres of political *tamashas* throughout the dissertation, specifically in Chapters 1, 2 and 3.

From the second half of the 20th century onwards, *tamasha* was increasingly deployed as an expression of regional and linguistic cultural pride, marshalled into service during the long agitation for the formation of the state of Maharashtra, which, in turn, inaugurated a new era of cultural nativism in the region. Needless to say, the celebration of *tamasha* as a form of cultural heritage did not translate into any material gains for the artists, and in fact, was premised on the systematic appropriation and sanitization of these "folk" forms. Even when *tamasha* began to be reclaimed as a veritable "folk art" (or *loknatya*) during this period, the unspoken assumption, as Vhatkar points out, was that the eponymous "folk" are provincial, uneducated and uncultured. Thus, the mobilization of

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Maharashtra" *Sociological Bulletin* 49, no. 2 (2000): 193-210.

[11] Bhimrao Kardak, *Ambedkari Jalse: Svarup va Karya,* (Mumbai: Abhinav Prakashan, 1978), 5-6

tamasha as an emblem of Marathi cultural pride was based on, and culminated in, the ousting of the actual folk in order to fabricate a more politically expedient "folk" form.

The gendered and casteized ways in which the rise of middle-class Marathi theatre (*sangeet natak*) in the 19th century and that of Marathi cinema in the 20th century precipitated the "hegemonic appropriation" of *tamasha* and *lavani* have been chronicled in the work of Sharmila Rege, Veena Naregal, Shailaja Paik, among others. Extending these arguments, I suggest that the revivalist zeal to integrate these "folk" forms into proscenium-style plays from the 1960s onwards is another significant, but largely overlooked, chapter in this history.[12] While the chapters that follow focus specifically on the shifting dramatic discourse around *tamasha* and *lavani* within the local, Marathi context, my approach is informed by wider contestations around the category of the "folk" within the field of modern Indian theatre and performance in general.

"Folk" and its (Dis)contents

The category of the "folk" has occupied a prominent, if contentious, place within modern Indian performance discourse, particularly within the field of theatre. There were multiple and contradictory ways in which the "folk" came to be consolidated as an essentialized category by the second half of the 20th century, and theatre played a crucial role in the process.

Theatre vs. Performance: The politics of cultural conservation

[12] The fact that there was a systematic incorporation of *tamasha* into proscenium-style plays has been noted by several Marathi scholars. For a dedicated study of this phenomenon, see Vishwanath Shinde, *Paramparik Tamasha ani Adhunik Vagnatya. Tamasha ani Adhunik Vaganatya*, (Pune, Pratima Prakashan, 1994).

The consolidation of the "folk" as a distinct cultural category that both epitomizes "the spirit of the nation" and serves as a conduit to its "past roots" started in the late nineteenth century, instigated by colonial anthropologists and their preoccupation with documenting native cultures.[13] However, it was only from the 1940s onward, with the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), a leftist, progressive and anti-fascist association invested in the "cultural awakening of the masses of India," that folk performances began to capture the imagination of urban, educated artists.[14] In order to optimize appeal and accessibility for the masses, IPTA artists devised performances using idioms from popular traditions local to the region: *bhavai* in Gujarat, *burrakatha* in Andhra Pradesh, *tamasha in* Maharashtra, *jatra* in Bengal, and so on. This approach has been criticized as being both patronizing and instrumentalist; however, for our purposes here, it is worth noting that the IPTA's interest in the "folk" was not premised on any conservationist or revivalist impulse. As Dalmia notes, "the patent concern was to reach and communicate with rural audiences, rather than preserve or indeed remold for urban use alone."[15] In the wake of independence from colonial rule in 1947, and the new relations between culture and capital that were institutionalized in the democratic nation-state from the 1950s, the form and function of the "folk" was reinvented.

Consider, for instance, Balwant Gargi's landmark survey on the "Folk Theater of India," which begins with a somewhat hackneyed provocation:

> The folk theater is impolite, rude, vulgar. It shocks prudes. The secular forms – Tamasha, Bhavai, Nautanki and Naqal, dominating the northern and western parts of India are replete with sexual jokes. It is considered improper for women to watch these plays. In the city of Poona, many professors and intellectuals, champions of culture,

[13] Vasudha Dalmia, *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 154-5.
[14] Ibid., 155.
[15] Ibid., 164.

> refuse to see a folk play because of its "vulgarity." Folk drama is unself-conscious, spontaneous, boisterously naive.[16]

Even though these popular forms, Gargi points out, have not been considered "worthy of serious consideration," his scholarly inquiry is motivated by the fact that "Indian folk theater has recently captured the interest of contemporary playwrights and directors."[17] Indeed, by 1991, when Gargi's book was published, the defining feature of modern Indian drama was its preoccupation with the "folk." Several canonical modern Indian plays – such as Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana,* Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal,* Chandrashekhar Kambar's *Jokuraswami,* Satish Alekar's *Mahanirvan,* Mama Varerkar's *Teen Paisacha Tamasha,* to name just a few – represent this new genre of "Urban Folk Theatre" as Aparna Dharwadker designates it, wherein stylistic elements from popular performance traditions like *yakshagana, bayalata, tamasha, gondhal,* etc. are incorporated into the play's dramaturgy.[18] This 'Theatre of Roots' movement, as it came to be known, reached its apogee in the 1970s -1980s, when the central government introduced a number of programs to establish the "contemporary relevance of traditional theatre," such as the annual scheme initiated by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA, or the National Academy for Music, Dance and Drama) to incentivize contemporary playwrights and directors to work with folk forms.[19] Espousing the same mandate, the Ford Foundation steadily launched a number of folk-oriented programs from the 1960s onwards, most notably the Theatre Laboratory project introduced in 1992.[20]

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[16] Balwant Gargi, *Folk Theater of India*, (Calcutta: Rupa & Co., 1991), 3.

[17] Ibid., ix.

[18] Aparna Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 318.

[19] Suresh Awasthi, the general secretary of the Sangeet Natak Academy, organized "National Roundtable on Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre" in 1971, and this event had a major impact on the Theatre of Roots movement. See Suresh Awasthi and Richard Schechner, "'Theatre of Roots': Encounter with Tradition," *TDR* 33, no. 4 (1989): 48-69.

[20] The Theatre Laboratory project provided funding and support to young theatre practitioners working with "folk" and "traditional" forms. See Sudhanva Deshpande, "What is to be Undone?" *Our Stage: Pleasures and Perils of Theatre Practice in India*, ed. Sudhanva Deshpande, Akshara K. V.,

This (re-)vitalization of folk forms on the urban Indian stage from the 1960s-1990s has received extensive scholarly attention. In some accounts, it is hailed as a critical challenge to hegemonic Western conceptions of modernity, thus representing the "antimodern," or an "alternative modernity."[21] At the same time, it has also been critiqued as a form of "internal imperialism;"[22] especially because unlike the IPTA, the SNA and Ford Foundation's approach to the "folk" manifested and engendered "a profound depoliticization," premised on an uncritical quest for authenticity that bore little material connection to the rural masses or the working classes, and catered more to the globalizing cultural marketplace.[23] Notably, the various schemes introduced by the SNA and the Ford Foundation were motivated by an expressly preservationist agenda – the SNA's founding principle was to "revive and preserve" folk performances,[24] and the impetus for the Ford Foundation's extensive and enduring monetary investment in the Indian cultural domain was to "preserve, revitalize, and make more accessible to the people of the developing world their own rich cultural heritage."[25] Much has been written about the checkered legacy of the SNA-Ford Foundation nexus, and its role in instigating a quasi-nativist "archival project" of national proportions.[26] I do not intend to reproduce those arguments here, but in addition, it worth noting

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Sameera Iyengar (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009): pp. 28.

[21] Dharwadker, *Theatres,* 138; Erin Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Stage* (London: Seagull, 2008), 5.

[22] Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*, (London New York: Routledge, 1993).

[23] G.P. Deshpande, "Art in the Age of Mechanical and Utsavical Reproduction," *Economic and Political Weekly* 7, no. 2 (1992).

[24] Dalmia, *Poetics,* 170.

[25] Leela Gandhi, "The Ford Foundation and Its Arts and Culture Program in India: A Short History (New Delhi: The Ford Foundation 50th Anniversary Monograph Series, Rockefeller Archive Center, 2002), 81.

[26] For more on the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Ford Foundation's investment in roots see Anita Cherian, "Fashioning a National Theatre: Institutions and Cultural Policy in Post-Independence India," (PhD Diss, New York University 2005); Rashna Darius Nicholson, "Canonising Impulses, Cartographic Desires, and The Legibility Of History," *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography*, eds. Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx ed. Tracy C. Davis et

that virtually all the major performance archives in India today – such as Natarang Pratishthan in Ghaziabad, Natya Shodh in Kolkata, AIIS Ethnomusicology Archives in Gurgaon, the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) archive in Mumbai, Rupayan Sansthan in Jodhpur – have been funded, at least in part, through the Ford Foundation.

Naturally, these archives do not necessarily reflect or reproduce the Ford Foundation's conservationist and/or revivalist agenda, and are all distinct in their origins and functioning. However, the fact remains that the very discourse of performance archiving and preservation in modern India was constructed around the specter of the authentic, but imperiled "folk." The allegedly imminent extinction of these "folk" arts provoked a distinct kind of *archival panic*, where the relationship between performance and its record emerged as a matter of profound creative and pragmatic concern. As Bishnupriya Dutt notes, during the early post-independence decades, "theatre" and "performances" were designated as binary categories. Archivists were "selected, funded, and entrusted with the task of reviving and archiving the hitherto neglected and marginalized folk and popular forms, but this is complicated by two factors: folk forms continued to evolve outside archival spaces, and such protection and preservation was not free of the state's ideological impositions."[27] In this dissertation, I demonstrate how this seeming incommensurability of the "folk" was negotiated in the specific context of *tamasha* and *lavani*, and the complex ways in which the state's "ideological impositions" were articulated and repudiated. I also illustrate how the binary divisions between "theatre" and folk "performances" are strategically upheld and collapsed in the discourse of performance preservation and revival.

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al (New York: Routledge, 2021), 186-205.

[27] Bishnupriya Dutt, "Rethinking Categories of Theatre and Performance: Archive, scholarship, and practices (a post- colonial Indian perspective)," *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography*, ed. Tracy C. Davis et al (New York: Routledge, 2021).

Folk vs. Classical: The reinvention of Indian performing arts

Within modern Indian cultural discourse, the "folk" is often presented alongside, and in opposition to the "classical." To return briefly to Gargi, his first chapter, titled "The Folk and the Classical" begins by listing a series of contrasts between the two categories, such as "the folk is unhewn, the classical chiseled, the folk sprawls, the classical demands mathematical exactness. One is rural, the other regal" but then goes on to clarify that the two "are not antithesis of each other."[28] As this excerpt indicates, the folk versus classical binary is not static, but is strategically erected and dismantled in service of larger ideological contexts. At the same time, it is essential to note that the "classical" itself is not a stable category, and in the context of Indian performance, it refers to a set of "invented traditions" that were argued into existence in the early 20th century.

The quest to forge a new national identity that was both sufficiently modern yet quintessentially Indian precipitated a radical reimagining of the cultural domain from the 1940s onward; and while the fields of visual arts and literature, as Indira Peterson and Davesh Soneji have noted, were cast as "innovative" and "modern," the rhetoric used for the performing arts was generally that of classicism – even when the processes of (re-)inventing the "classical" entailed modern, western practices of scientific standardization. Many kinds of performing arts were thus refashioned as "classical" forms in the 20th century, primarily by positing a continuous relationship with a high cultural, precolonial past, and representing them as being "essentially sacred."[29] Recent scholarship in the field of South Asian performance studies has shed light on this process, through which forms like *Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi* dance and *Carnatic* and *Hindustani* music were

[28] Gargi, *Folk,* 3
[29] Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji, *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India*, (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4-6.

reinvented as "classical" arts within a new nationalist paradigm.[30] As these studies illustrate, and as Peterson and Soneji observe, "the classical could not be constructed without pitting it against its others, namely 'low,' or mass culture, popular and folk culture."[31]

The case of *tamasha* and *lavani* is particularly significant as an exception to this pattern. For, unlike other hereditary communities of performance, the genealogy of *tamasha* and *lavani* had virtually no religious context or content on the basis of which such sacredness could be claimed; for the most part, they continue to be perceived as "*lok kala*" (literally, "the art of the people") or "folk" forms. At the same time, even though they were not elevated to classical status, they were still subjected to processes of hegemonic embourgeoisement from the 1940s onward; but here, the low and mass were strategically posited as being both the undesired "other" as well as the underlying "essence" of *tamasha* and *lavani*. The chapters that follow trace the trajectory of this non-classical embourgeoisement, and the catalyzing role of theatre in this process.

National vs. Local: Performance and the politics of place

Much existing and emerging scholarship on theatre and performance in India in English, including the works cited above, designate the nation as the central organizing category of analysis,

[30] For instance, see Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (2 November 1985): 1869–76; Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Nrithya Pillai, "The Politics of Naming the South Indian Dancer," *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* XL (2020): 13-15; Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 2 (June 1, 1990): 258-286; Shweta Sachdeva, "In Search of the Tawa'if in History: Courtesans, Nautch Girls and Celebrity Entertainers in India," (PhD Diss, University of London, 2008; Anurima Banerji, Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State (London: Seagull Books, 2019); Janaki Bakhle, Two Men and Music: Nationalism and the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[31] Peterson and Soneji, *Performing,* 6-7.

even if only to demonstrate its inadequacy. These ongoing ideological contestations on the national scale do provide critical background for my inquiry into the relationship between archival imaginaries and theatre practice within the context of *tamasha* and *lavani;* however, I am more invested in excavating the role of regional politics and state governance in shaping these processes. To that end, while I situate my arguments in each chapter within the larger, national socio-political discourse, my analysis centers on the local Marathi and Maharashtrian context. This approach enables a nuanced, molecular view of wider structural mechanisms, and in many cases, the local does not function merely as a microcosm of the national, but opens up different and singular avenues of inquiry, and compels a revaluation of familiar, generalized accounts. The first chapter on censorship for instance, argues that the regulatory discourse on *tamasha* was motivated by contingent and almost parochial concerns, which cannot easily be subsumed within the broad rubric of "postcolonialism," and is perhaps distinct from the trajectory of other popular forms.

Since the "folk" has historically been invoked in abstract and depoliticized terms, it is essential, as Brahma Prakash argues, to "challenge the commonsensical understanding of the 'folk' as a homogenous category" that conjures it as "a pre-political formation or as a pure political act of the 'subaltern classes'" and "merely as a culture of enslavement or as an assertion of the desire of the ordinary people."[32] To this end, he proposes and demonstrates that "folk" must be approached primarily as a region-specific, topographical phenomenon, while also remaining attentive to cross-regional and intercultural connections.[33] Most crucially, in place of the abstract, overdetermined idea of the "folk," Prakash proposes the more concrete, material concept of "cultural labour" as an

[32] Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'folk Performance' in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7.
[33] Ibid., 38.

analytical category for the study of popular performance forms. His work is among a growing corpus of scholarship focused on labor and activism in/as performance in India.[34]

In a similar vein, since as this dissertation inquires into the disjuncture between the immaterial invocations of "folk" as a category and the material implications for artists, their art and their livelihood, I use "folk" only as a citational term, almost always within quotation marks. Drawing on G.P. Deshpande's contention that "these [folk] forms may be more meaningfully called subaltern," I primarily use the term 'subaltern' to represent the art and hereditary artists of *tamasha*.[35] Of course, the category of the subaltern too is deeply contested, and in somewhat similar ways. Its circulation as a homogenous and unmarked term has been extensively critiqued.[36] However, with the caveat that within the South Asian context, "there can be no subaltern outside of caste markings,"[37] this term remains a vital and dynamic category, and is particularly relevant for our purposes here, because it historically emerged as part of wider debates around the hegemony and limitations of the archive.

Archives and Performance:

[34] Other recent work includes Dia Da Costa, *Politicizing Creative Economy: Activism and a Hunger Called Theater* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Shayoni Mitra, "Contesting Capital: A History of Political Theatre in Postcolonial Delhi" (PhD diss., New York University, 2009); A. Mangai, *Acting Up: Gender and Theatre in India, 1979 Onwards* (New Delhi, India: LeftWord, 2015).
[35] G.P. Deshpande, "Europe and Our Theatre," in *Dialectics of Defeat: The Problems of Culture in Postcolonial India,* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2006), 93.
[36] For more on these critiques, see Sumit Sarkar, "The Decline of Subaltern in Subaltern Studies," in *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, ed. David Ludden (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001): pp. 400-429; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory,* eds. P. Williams and L. Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 66-111; Rawat Ramnarayan, K. Satyanarayana, eds., *Dalit Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Gopal Guru, "Egalitarianism and the Social Sciences in India," in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate On Experience and Theory*, eds. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (New Delhi: Oxford, 2012), 9-28.
[37] Ramnarayan and Satyanarayana, *Dalit Studies,* 14.

This dissertation contributes to an emergent archival turn in the study of Indian theatre and performance. Although archival concerns have only featured obliquely in much of the foundational scholarship on Indian performance, a few recent works, such as Davesh Soneji's *Unfinished Gestures*, and his co-edited volume *Performing Pasts,* directly address the issues entailed with documenting performance, and highlight the importance of embodiment, or "mnemonic bodily practices," in this process. Shailaja Paik's approach similarly seeks to "break boundaries and create conversations between different archives and methods: oral history, folklore, ethnography, and life narrative" in order to center Dalit epistemologies.[38] Anjali Arondekar's essay, which illustrates how dispatches from the history of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj challenges the kind of "recursive analysis" that the historical archive produces around the figure of the *devadasi* dancer, is yet another crucial intervention in this direction.[39] Notably, the recently published essay collection, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography,* contains two articles that directly interrogate the place and meaning of the "archive" within Indian theatrical discourse.[40] In addition, there have been numerous conferences, seminars and projects being organized around these topics in the last three to five years.[41]

Archival Access and Excess: Perspectives from South Asian Area Studies

[38] Paik, "Mangala Bansode"
[39] Anjali Arondekar, "Subject to Sex: A Small History of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj," *South Asian Feminisms*, eds. Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 244-265.
[40] Dutt, "Rethinking"; Nicholson, "Canonising"
[41] To cite a few examples, in 2017 Sharmistha Saha and Ashutosh Poddar organized a conference titled "Performance Making and the Archive" hosted at the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai. A collection of essays based on this conference is forthcoming with Routledge. Katha Siyah, a theatre company, has been collaborating with the Bangalore International Centre, to organize a series of virtual events around theatre criticism and documentation, including one session dedicated to archives and archival practices, hosted in 2020. In a somewhat different register, Shilpa Mudbi Kothakota and Adithya Kothakota started the "Urban Folk Project" in 2017, an initiative to research, archive and spread folk forms in Karnataka. Several other such archival projects in their formative stages at the moment, particularly within the world of dance.

While this is a fairly recent development in the field of Indian theatre and performance specifically, within the wider domain of South Asian Studies as a whole, anxieties around archival access and excess have long played a conspicuous and catalyzing role. The critical-historiographical approach proposed by postcolonial theory – particularly through the work of the Subaltern Studies collective – is organized around the circumstantial recovery, revaluation and rejection of the archives of colonization.[42] As the scholarly contestations around the term subaltern glossed above encapsulate, many of the fundamental assumptions of postcolonial historiography in India have since been called into question, especially through the interventions of intersectional Dalit feminist theory.[43] At the same time, some of these foundational challenges to the logic of the archive have inspired further work that is especially relevant to the subject of this dissertation. Theorizations of the relationship between (oral) memory and (recorded) archive, which affirm that the two are always co-constituted, and foreground the crucial role that embodied experiences play in these processes, are significant in this regard. To cite one paradigmatic example, Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992,* an expansive inquiry into the narrativization of the infamous "riot" of 1922, emphasizes how oral histories are not primeval sources that "supersede" the colonial and nationalist archive, but rather, are placed in a "complex relationship of variation to the official record."[44] Amin's notion of the "recalcitrant event" – that is, an event that is not easily accommodated into a causal/linear account – is taken up by Arondekar as an invitation to move

[42] To cite just a small, but representative selection, see Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): pp. 37-44; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[43] The possibility and limitations of intersectional subalternity have been extensively theorized in the essays assembled in Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore, *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020).

[44] Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 197.

beyond the "contested fact, the unseen record, from the history of evidence and into the realm of narration." Rather than approaching the archive as a "central site of endless promise," in order to recover or restore that which is "lost" in the archive, Arondekar examines how the archive mobilizes a variety of discourses, including those of oral narratives, local memory, and ethnographic anecdotes, to create its own "truth-effects."[45] This shift in perspective from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject resonates with other work on colonial knowledge production, most distinctly with Ann Laura Stoler's privileging of "archiving-as-process" over "archives-as-things."[46] Her approach "attends to processes of production, relations of power in which archives are produced, sequestered, and rearranged" and interrogates the "epistemic conditions" under which archives and archival discourses are produced.

Adopting a similar perspective, in this dissertation, I track the processes – historical, cultural, political, intellectual, socioeconomic – through which the archival discourse around the preservation of *tamasha* and *lavani* has been articulated and contested from the mid-20th century onwards, and the vital ways in which the truth-effects of these discourses were created and disseminated on urban proscenium stages. This is most succinctly illustrated in the second chapter, which elaborates on the pivotal role of one stupendously successful Marathi play, *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* (1965), in fortifying a hegemonic remedial discourse around these subaltern forms, and modelling a process of structural appropriation and sanitization that further marginalized disenfranchised communities of *tamasha*

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[45] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.

[46] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). The process of colonial knowledge production is also examined in other work like Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Chris Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Phillip B. Wagoner, "Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 4 (October 2003): pp. 783-814.

artists. Such instances compel a reimagining of what constitutes an archival record, to include not just durable, institutionalized artifacts, but also seemingly transient, embodied phenomena like performance.

(In)visibility and Archival Absence: Perspectives from Performance Studies

Contestations around the philosophical and pragmatic stakes of the relationship between performance and the archive is among the most foundational and lively debates within the field of Performance Studies. The provocative idea that performance is essentially ephemeral, such that it "becomes itself through disappearance" and that its "only life is in the present," holds performance as being fundamentally antithetical to the record, and outside the reproductive logic of capital.[47] This position was most famously articulated by Peggy Phelan, and has been challenged and transposed through various opposing perspectives that emphasize performance's "staying power." Performance, it has been argued, is that which "remains" – Joseph Roach traces these remains within genealogies of cultural memory;[48] Diana Taylor proposes the concept of the "repertoire" to designate the complex ways in which "embodied and performed acts generate, record and transmit knowledge."[49] Rebecca Schneider contends that re-enactments of the past stand as proof against the discourse of presentism that surrounds performance;[50] Robin Bernstein's work offers a different perspective on this relationship, by uncovering the covert scripts that inhere in archival artifacts.[51] Additionally, the

[47] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
[48] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
[49] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
[50] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
[51] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood From Slavery to Civil Rights*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

pervasive mediatization of our contemporary context further reconfigures the possibilities and limits of the live, as evidenced through the work of Philip Auslander, Sarah Bay-Cheng, Susan Broadhurst, Steve Dixon, among others.[52]

My theoretical orientation to archives and performance is shaped by, and intervenes in, these debates, which in themselves have now grown to be so prolific and generative, that they can no longer be mapped within the interdisciplinary purview of Performance Studies alone, and intersect with work in Critical Race Studies, Queer Theory and Sexuality Studies, Digital Media Theory, and so on. For the sake of clarity, I identify here the major lines of inquiry that I pursue specifically in my research.

In engaging questions of archival absence, I draw on the contentions around visibility politics and presence within performance theory. Phelan, for instance, argues that the "payoff of visibility" for underrepresented minorities is invariably stereotype and objectification, and thus advocates for invisibility – "a refusal to appear" – as a subversive strategy, one that is most effectively realized through the ephemeral event of performance. In a related vein, José Esteban Muñoz attends to "invisible evidence" that manifests through negation, "through a process of erasure that redoubles and marks the systematic erasure of minoritarian histories."[53] Such deliberate absenting, however, cannot always be repurposed as resistance for groups that have already been aggressively invisibilized, as Taylor explicates through examples of Native American and Latin

[52] Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999); Sarah Bay-Cheng et al, *Performance and Media: Taxonomies for a Changing Field* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Susan Broadhurst et al, *Performance and Technology: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).
[53] José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 6.

American populations in the United States. Recent scholarship on the performance of race, such as Daphne Brooks' *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* and Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* illustrate the ways in which spectacular or radical minoritarian performances problematize any conventional understanding of the concepts of visibility and resistance.[54] The stakes of hyper-/in-visibility are amplified within the delimited act of theatre, where the visual field is foregrounded and distilled by the unseen "dark matter" of performance.[55] I address these issues of absence and erasure most directly in the third chapter, which illustrates how disappearance is invoked as both a historiographical problem and a subversive dramatic trope in three plays that stage resistance to the caste-based appropriation of subaltern cultural forms like *tamasha.*

In so doing, I analyze the intersections between the "historical past and the performative present" and the effective mobilization of theatre as a way of "performing history," to borrow from the title of Freddie Rokem's influential work.[56] This approach coheres with critical interventions within the field of theatre and performance historiography that probe how the seemingly ephemeral act of performance leaves traces: affectively, politically, and materially. Ellen MacKay's theorization of the "dissolutive ontology" of Early Modern English Theatre suggests that the "transient and patchy record" reflects the resistance of the early modern stage to its own documentation, which in turn mirrors the prevalent anti-theatrical bias that regarded theatre as inevitably culminating in disaster and dissolution.[57] Tracy C. Davis' meditations on the relationship between theatre,

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[54] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Brooks, Daphne, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
[55] Andrew Sofer, *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, & Performance*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013).
[56] Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000)
[57] Ellen MacKay, *Persecution, Plague, and Fire: Fugitive Histories of the Stage in Early Modern England*

performance and time have shaped my own thinking on these subjects, alongside other accounts of how performance engages its multiple pasts and its possible futures; such as Marvin Carlson, Alice Rayner and other scholars' insights on theatrical hauntings, and Scott Maggelsen's work on simulations (or "simming"), especially his concept of preenactment, that is, performance as preparation for foreseen futures.[58] In reimagining the historiographical possibilities of performance, I am inspired by what Noémie Ndiaye, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, endorses as "a reparative relational stance towards texts, archives, and performances…that is open to changes, surprises, and hope."[59] Ndiaye's citation of Erika Fischer-Lichte in this context is especially resonant, since the latter's work, particularly the concept of "interweaving performance cultures" proposes a transformative relationship with the past, that demands "not erasure but new ways of its reappropriation and recycling."[60]

Fischer-Lichte's work is among a range of critical sources on inter/intracultural performance that I consult, in my attempt to develop a robust account of the ethical and aesthetic stakes of documenting performance, especially under conditions of cultural hegemony and imperialism.[61]

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 6.

[58] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Alice Rayner, "Rude Mechanicals and the 'Specters of Marx." *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 4, 2002, 535-554; Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[59] Noémie Ndiaye, "Off the Record," R*outledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography*, ed. Tracy C. Davis et al (New York: Routledge, 2020), 238.

[60] Erika Fischer-Lichte, ed. *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, (New York: Routledge, 2014); 13.

[61] Other sources include Biodun Jeyifo, "The Reinvention of Theatrical Tradition: Critical Discourses on Interculturalism in the African Theatre," *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis (London: Routledge, 1996); Catherine Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Laura Edmondson, "National Erotica: The Politics of 'Traditional' Dance in Tanzania," *TDR* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 153-170; Alan Filewod, *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); David Donkor, "Gyamfi's Golden Soap: Commodity Marketing, Reform Legitimation, and the Performance of Cultural Authenticity in Ghanaian Popular Theatre," *Ghana Studies* 12/13 (2009/2010): pp. 189-216;

While this is an overarching theme that runs through the dissertation as a whole, the relationship between theatre performance and/as documentation is examined at length in Chapter Four. Analyzing two contemporary plays that seek to document the "real" lives of "real" *lavani* dancers, I foreground fundamental questions that haunt historical and ethnographic research across contexts: who has the right to speak for whom? What is the relationship between representation and re-presentation?[62] This line of inquiry is also informed by compelling deliberations on the relationship between theatre and the "real" world – glossed variously by rubrics like verbatim theatre, documentary theatre, playback theatre – or what Carol Martin more broadly designates as "theatre of the real."[63]

On the whole, my dissertation research is inspired by, and intervenes in, existing scholarship on Indian theatre and performance in particular and South Asian studies more broadly, as well as the interdisciplinary field of Performance Studies. In illustrating how theatre was imagined and mobilized as a crucial, but hitherto largely understudied, archival site for the preservation of "folk" forms like *tamasha* and *lavani,* I hope to contribute to a growing body of critical work investigating the relationship between performance and politics in the Maharashtra region.[64] More generally, this dissertation proposes and participates in a critical evaluation of what Performance Studies, with its

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[62] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives." *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247-72.
[63] Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, eds., *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Will Hammond and Dan Steward, eds., *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (London: Oberon, 2008); Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
[64] Anna C. Schultz, *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Veena Naregal, "Marginality, Regional Forms and State Patronage," *Seminar India* 588 (2008); Meera Kosambi, *Gender, Culture and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence* (London: Routledge, 201; Christian Lee Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution: Vernacularization, Religion, and the Premodern Public Sphere in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

interdisciplinary approach, can yield for the study of South Asia; specifically in this case, for modern and contemporary India. This is a question of some significance, because the foundations of Performance Studies as a discipline – epitomized in the theoretical and/or creative work of Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Philip Zarilli, among others – may in many ways be considered Orientalist, based primarily on mystifications of "ritual" practice in the East. Critical contributions from the Global South, including emerging scholarship on South Asian performance in recent years, have considerably transformed this original scholarly landscape, and my work is envisioned as another step in this direction.

Chapterization and Methodology

"Performances of Posterity" follows a broadly chronological arc. The first chapter, "Saved by Surveillance: The Many Uses of Censorship," begins in the 1940s-1950s, when *tamasha* preservation started to be framed as a law-and-order problem. Publicly decried for being excessively obscene, and covertly targeted for being seditious, *tamasha* was summarily banned in 1947 by the ruling Congress government in the newly independent state of Bombay. Following huge public outcry and criticism, the ban was withdrawn, and in its stead, *tamasha* came to be officially censored under the Bombay Police Act from 1954 onwards. In the first half of the chapter, I reconstruct this rather patchy history by collating various different sources, including government reports, censor files, magazine articles, anecdotal accounts, and so on. I argue that in the *tamasha* case, censorship was posited as a preservatory, rather than prohibitive, force, thus introducing a new kind of remedial discourse around this art form. The second half of the chapter examines the kinds of objectionable elements the ban and censorship of *tamasha* intended to target, and the types of regulatory

mechanisms deployed for this purpose. The chapter concludes with a note on the current legacy of the Censor Board.

While the Censor Board, in later years, shifted its focus away from *tamasha*, the remedial discourse it introduced endured for decades to come. The second chapter, "Redirected Desires: Sanitization, Reform and the Revitalization of *Tamasha*" traces the critical role of theatre in executing and expanding this censorial vision, through a reading of Vasant Sabnis' *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* ("Fulfil My Desires," 1965), a play that actively advocates for, participates in, and in some ways pioneers, the sanitization and reform of *tamasha*. This sanitization process, I argue, is a complex one, that is premised on the mobilization of seemingly disparate discourses of reform, regionalism, and modernity, and the simultaneous, conspicuous elision of caste. As a hugely successful, and widely translated and adapted popular comedy, *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* is commonly celebrated as the first successful experiment in modifying *tamasha* into a "respectable" form, suited for educated, white-collar, middle-class audiences. Most crucially, it reframed the preservation and reform of *tamasha* as a dramaturgical project and popularized a new hybrid genre: that of the *tamasha-pradhan natak,* or "*tamasha*-based play." In excavating and assessing the profound impact that this landmark play had on the historiography of *tamasha,* I emphasize the critical, if ambivalent, role of humor and parody in perpetuating such processes of cultural appropriation.

Such processes of appropriation and reform, especially in the context of performance, are often represented as totalizing and all-encompassing, that in turn serve to elide histories of resistance and protest. While acknowledging that the reformist discourse in *tamasha* has had enduring material and ideological consequences, I also foreground how these discourses have been counteracted. The third chapter, "Disappeared Histories: Cultural Appropriation and its Contestations" focuses on the resistance against hegemonic appropriation, bringing together three plays that stage genealogies of

caste-based appropriation of *tamasha*: Datta Bhagat's *Avarta* ("Vortex," 1976), Rustom Achalkhamb's *Kaifiyat* ("An Account," 1981), and Yogiraj Waghmare's *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi* ("That Which Never Happened," 1978). I interrogate how performance's potential for "disappearance" is used as a discursive and dramatic device within these texts. The chapter is divided into five sections: the introduction traces the complex and conflicting ways in which *tamasha* performance has been positioned within modern Dalit theatre praxis and historiography. The next three sections present three different models of theorizing disappearance in the context of subaltern art in general and *tamasha* in particular, each oriented around a specific play: Disappearance as appropriation (*Avarta*), as destruction (*Kaifiyat*) and as disavowal (*Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi*) respectively. The chapter concludes with a short reflection on the conspicuous lack of any female character in these plays, and the symbolic implications of this absence within the context of the dissertation as a whole.

Since *tamasha* and *lavani* are routinely denigrated as being vulgar and obscene, the trope of the dancing girl, emblematized here as the *lavani* dancer, is often invoked to signify the moral turpitude of these art forms; at the same time, the *lavani* dancer is also mobilized as the ever-fertile site of moral reform, who can be literally and figuratively molded to suit hegemonic projects of cultural conservation. While all chapters of the dissertation substantiate how issues of cultural preservation are staked upon the bodies of women and articulated through control of female sexuality, this subject is most directly addressed in the fourth chapter. Titled "'Our Anklets Are Not Shackles:' Gender, Labor and (Auto)Biographical Performance," this chapter centers on the figure of the *lavani* dancer, who is interpellated as subject, object and metaphor in the discourse of *tamasha* preservation. It is divided into three main sections: it begins with a brief survey of the aesthetic, historical and socio-political processes through which *lavani* dancers have come to be stereotypically portrayed as victims, prostitutes, or cultural paragons within literary, political and public discourse. The following sections of the chapter segue into a discussion of two plays that attempt to provide a

more "real" picture of the *lavani* dancer. The first is Sushama Deshpande's *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* ("Her Mother's Story", 1995), a quasi-fictional autobiography of a *lavani* dancer, based on months of intensive ethnographic research done at Aryabhushan Tamasha theatre in Pune. The second is *Sangeet Bari* (2015), a theatre production created and performed in collaboration with *lavani* artists from Aryabhushan Tamasha theatre. My analyses focus on the ways in which both plays take up and mine the documentary potential of performance, and attempt to write women back as agential actors within the larger landscape of *lavani* performance as well as its preservation.

The dissertation ends with an Epilogue that scrutinizes the issues associated with documenting performance at the ideological and pragmatic level, focusing on questions of media, technology, cataloguing, organization and access in the context of various institutional archives dedicated to performance in India today. This ethnographically engaged reflection integrates the thematic elements of the four dissertation chapters so as to build an account of how issues of censorship, reform, gender and caste inform the way performance archives are understood, organized and accessed.

My research draws primarily from archival and ethnographic sources, but the methodologies I use vary across chapters and are dictated by the materials I engage and the conceptual intervention I hope to make. Since the first chapter builds on Michel Foucault and Judith Butler's theorizations of censorship as "productive," I foreground the archival traces that censorship leaves behind. In consulting these archival sources, I simultaneously attempt to generate a critical account of archival absence, distinguishing, as per Stoler's formulation, what is unrepresented because it could "go without saying" from that which is absent because it could not be said openly, or not yet find articulation.[65] The second chapter maps the enduring impact and significance of a landmark

[65] Stoler, *Along,* 19.

production, *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara,* and methodologically, I approach it from a reception studies perspective, consulting reviews, reports, adaptations and imitations of this play across the decades. In so doing, I adopt a capacious understanding of appropriation, which owes much to E. Patrick Johnson's reflections on the subject. While acknowledging that processes of syncretic cultural exchange and borrowing are ongoing and inevitable, I highlight how "the pursuit of authenticity," in Johnson's words, is "yet another trope manipulated for cultural capital," but is often posited as an "emotional and moral" project.[66]

Chapter Three examines how *tamasha* is positioned and historicized within the Dalit Theatre movement, one of the most prolific and influential literary movements in the modern Marathi cultural landscape. Since much of the Dalit Theatre movement centered on critically redefining aesthetic taste and pleasure, the mode of inquiry I employ in this chapter is to do a close reading of the three plays under discussion, attending specifically to their innovations and interventions at an aesthetic and dramaturgical register. I contextualize these texts and readings within larger debates about the memorialization, documentation and ownership of subaltern cultural production. The fourth chapter reflects on the ruptures between representation and re-presentation, and focuses on two plays that seek to provide a more unmediated, real picture of the *lavani* dancer. Accordingly, in addition to consulting archival and other textual sources, my analysis is also partly based on ethnography, to enable a more embodied and self-reflexive inquiry into the politics of mediation. The Epilogue constellates the overarching methodological and thematic through line of this dissertation, namely, the co-constitution of performance and archives in the modern Indian theatrical context.

[66] E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2-3.

CHAPTER ONE

Saved by Surveillance: The Many Uses of Censorship

I. Introduction

Colonial Repression, Postcolonial Panic: Re-framing Censorial Discourse

In 1910, the British colonial government issued an unconditional prohibition on the massively popular Marathi play *Kichaka-Vadha* ("The Slaying of Kichaka") on charges of sedition. Written by K.P. Khadilkar in 1907, the play dramatized an episode from the Indian epic *Mahabharata,* deploying it as an allegory for the oppressive British rulers and their imminent overthrow through violent nationalist action. While the ban did nothing to diminish the political and cultural impact of the play, this act of prohibition is undoubtedly the most (in)famous case of colonial dramatic censorship in the Maharashtra region.[1] This ban was issued under the Dramatic Performances Act (DPA), passed in 1876 specifically to suppress anti-imperialist, seditious performances. The DPA was just one among several such legislations instituted by the colonial regime to quell native dissent, the other notorious example being the India Press Act of 1910. Much of the recent scholarship on the subject of censorship in India, across various spheres such as theater, print or film, invoke these repressive colonial laws to demonstrate their ideological continuance or disjunctures into the postcolonial period.[2] These generative readings of censorship often stage a shift in the way we think about this concept, arguing that censorship is not simply

[1] K.P. Khadilkar, *Kichaka-Vadha*, trans. Rakesh Herald Solomon, in *Globalization, Nationalism and the Text of Kichaka-Vadha* (New York: Anthem Press, 2014).
[2] For instance, see Nandi Bhatia, *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), Siddharth Narrain, "Censorship and the Law," *Seminar* 588 (2008): 49-51 for theater, William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) for film, and Devika Sethi, *War Over Words: Censorship in India, 1930-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

prohibitive, but may be read as "productive" or "constitutive," operating at "the most basic level of discourse and comprehension."[3] This New Censorship approach builds on Michel Foucault's conception of the pervasive networks disciplinary power, wherein repression produces discursive possibilities even as it appears to constrain them, as well as Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu's Foucauldian readings of censorship as producing the very conditions of subjectivity, and reproducing normative behaviors. In other words, in such an account, censorship is not simply an external force acting on a free subject, but is intrinsic to any utterance, and is a necessary condition for language itself. Studies that adopt this New Censorship approach tend to focus not only on direct state repressions on certain texts or behaviors, but on the broader discourse of "cultural regulation," taking into account forces of unofficial censorship which may include behavioral norms, moral codes and internalized modes of self-censorship.

This chapter, which offers a historical account of *tamasha* censorship, attempts to illustrate both the prohibitive and productive aspects of censorial discourse; however, the central argument of the chapter is that in the *tamasha* case, censorship was conceived not just as a repressive force, nor simply as a form of cultural regulation. Rather, the professed function of censorship, within the *tamasha* context, was its preservatory power. Censorship was imagined, justified and exerted as a means of "preserving what is best, healthy and creative in the art of *tamasha*."[4] Such a counter-intuitive conception of censorship, as a preservatory force, emerged out of particular postcolonial anxieties around cultural production, regional power and popular discourse. As I illustrate in this chapter, censorship's professed preservative capacities were premised on the assumption that there was an "authentic" or "original" ideal form of *tamasha* that could be saved by excising any

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[3] Helen Freshwater, "Towards a Redefinition of Censorship," in *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age*, ed. Beate Müller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004): 217-237.
[4] "Letter no. Est. 162/2709," Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 2.

"demoralizing aberrations." This idea may be read as being ideologically apiece with wider contentions around the place of the "folk" and the "classical" in the newly-independent nation, which has been reframed in the Introduction as a type of postcolonial *archival panic*.[5] However, in the *tamasha* case, as we shall see, the desire to preserve and refo rm the "folk" form of *tamasha* were inflected by the peculiarities of local sociohistorical and cultural circumstances in Maharashtra region from the late 1940s onwards, when Bombay became the first independently governed province in India. The preservation-through-censorship paradigm was consolidated through a specific set of perspectives on caste, class and gender relations within the realm of cultural production in the region, as articulated by state authorities and cultural elites. In order to make this history legible, it is necessary to develop a different etiology of postcolonial censorship that is not framed as either a continuation or a rupture from the colonial past, but as an entirely different order of regulation borne of exigent, sometimes parochial, anxieties.

This chapter thus begins with the events in 1947, when the Bombay government declared a ban on *tamasha* performance, and examines the public discourse within which this legislative act was enmeshed, and the kind of responses it elicited; it then traces the legal proceedings and cultural debates leading up to the formation of the Tamasha Censor Board in 1953. The latter half of the chapter examines the kinds of objectionable elements the ban and censorship of *tamasha* intended to target, and the types of regulatory mechanisms deployed for this purpose. The chapter concludes with a note on the current legacy of the Censor Board.

The Postman and the Proprietor: Mytho-historical Accounts of the Tamasha *Ban*

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[5] Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji, eds., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

One way to tell the story of the *tamasha* ban would be to begin with on a fateful day in 1948,[6] when a postman named Bapusaheb Jintikar was on his regular beat in the old Ganesh Peth neighborhood of Pune. On his rounds he made a stop at Aryabhushan Tamasha Theatre, to deliver a telegram to the owner, Ahmedsheth Tambe. Tambe tore open the telegram right away: it was an official notification by the newly independent Bombay State, declaring an indefinite ban on *tamasha* performances. The motive behind this ban, the telegram proceeded to explain, was that *tamasha* was detrimental to society, especially because it encouraged vices like consuming alcohol, squandering money, using drugs and other addictive substances. As it happened, Jintikar was something of a *rasik* or connoisseur of *tamasha* himself; and while he acknowledged that there was some truth to the government's objections, his thoughts immediately turned to the thousands of artists who depended on *tamasha* for their livelihood. There were approximately three hundred and fifty *tamasha* troupes active in the province at that time, he estimated, and each troupe consisted of about a hundred and fifty artists; how would they survive? The two men decided that something needed to be done. Upon Jintikar's recommendation, the postman and the proprietor approached a leading intellectual and aesthetician, Abasaheb Mujumdar, for guidance. Mujumdar, in turn, arranged and accompanied them to a meeting with Morarji Desai and B.G. Kher (the Home Minister and Chief Minister of Bombay respectively) and appealed to them to rescind the ban.

I begin with this vignette because it encapsulates the methodological challenges, historiographical elisions, and ideological stakes involved in narrativizing the ban and consequent censorship of *tamasha*. Although these are relatively recent historical events that have had an

[6]It is quite possible that these events may have taken place in 1947 and not 1948, as Jintikar claims in his recollection. Although the ban was issued in 1947, many journalistic and critical accounts date it to 1948, which may have possibly colored Jintikar's retrospective memories of these events, which were only documented many years after the fact. This recollection is included as the Editor's introduction to one volume of the multi-part collection of Patthe Bapurao's works, published by Jintikar.

enduring impact on the modern trajectory of subaltern art forms, and on the regulation of cultural production in general, it is surprisingly difficult to find a coherent and complete account of the conditions under which the ban on *tamasha* was imposed and later rescinded; this episode is usually reduced to a brief mention in most critical and popular writing on *tamasha*, and there are major discrepancies regarding dates, motives, and so on.[7] Towards that end, I attempt to piece together a history of these "recalcitrant events" by assembling information from various kinds of sources: government reports and internal correspondences, popular and literary periodicals, newspaper articles, censorship records, contemporary critical and scholarly works, supplemented by ethnographic and anecdotal accounts.[8] However, it is worth noting that the sparseness of information around these events – what may be described, borrowing from Ellen MacKay's formulation in a vastly different context – as the archive's seeming lack, namely "its anecdotalism, its accidentalism, its feckless and troué miscellany" is not simply attributable to negligence or ahistorical attitudes, but is perhaps indicative of a willful resistance to documentation.[9] The patchiness of the historical record around the *tamasha* ban, I suggest, is ideologically apiece with the kinds of intentional obfuscations that the ruling governmental and cultural authorities orchestrated in order to conceal their actual motivations and positions, as we shall see in later sections of the chapter.

One crucial, if biased, source of information (from which the above vignette is drawn) is the postman Jintikar's own digressive, anecdotal recollection, written retrospectively twenty years after the fact. Although his autobiographical account is rather self-congratulatory and contains some

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[7] Most critical and journalistic accounts, including Jintikar's, date the ban to 1948, though the official government sources specify that the ban was issued in 1947. The discrepancies regarding motives are discussed in later sections of the paper.

[8] The concept of a "recalcitrant event," that is, an event that is not easily accommodated into a causal/linear account is borrowed from Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[9] Ellen MacKay, *Persecution, Plague, and Fire: Fugitive Histories of the Stage in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

factual inaccuracies, it offers an important corrective to the ways in which *tamasha* censorship has been represented within recent scholarship, especially in English. Veena Naregal's incisive critique, for instance, accurately characterizes the regulation of *tamasha* in late-1940s as a logical culmination of the "persistent anxieties from upper caste cultural and political elites" around the popular status of this art form.[10] However, in its commitment to exposing the hegemonic caste-class interests that were at work in this project, her account, paradoxically, overlooks the considerable efforts made by the disenfranchised community of *tamasha* artists to resist these regulations, raise public awareness around the issue and hold the government accountable for their actions. As I illustrate in this chapter, such seemingly totalitarian acts of censorship were undergirded by alleged, unseen, unlikely, and ultimately unequal, kinds of negotiations between state and society, between the classes and the masses. The blurring of boundaries between the perceived perpetrators, defenders and victims of the *tamasha*-related legislations of the 1940s-1950s is embodied in the figure of Jintikar himself.

As the opening vignette illustrates, Jintikar is the undisputed hero of his own story. In fact, his retelling of events concludes with the assertion that "it would not be wrong to claim that through our actions, Ahmedsheth and I alleviated the sufferings of the whole *tamasha* community of Maharashtra." He also pictures himself, quite literally (with photographic evidence), as one among "those who formed the first [*tamasha*] association and redressed the grievances of *tamasha* artists." However, history has been less charitable to his efforts, for he is now a virtually forgotten figure, largely ignored in critical accounts of the history of *tamasha*.[11] Even when he does find passing mention, it is not as a savior of the *tamasha* artists, but rather the opposite, as an active contributor to

[10] Veena Naregal, "Marginality, Regional Forms and State Patronage," *Seminar India* 588 (2008): 33-39.

[11] By and large, most Marathi sources make no mention of him at all. Sharmila Rege refers to his publications in her essays on *tamasha*, and Naregal mentions him briefly in her work of *tamasha*, but solely in his capacity as a publisher.

the hegemonic appropriation of *tamasha* by upper-caste interests. Naregal, for instance, references Jintikar for his crucial role in the canonization of the Brahmin poet-composer Patthe Bapurao in the 1940s, primarily through his life-long project to collate and publish the poet's works in seven volumes. His elevation of Patthe Bapurao is read by Naregal as ideologically congruent with his aspirational Brahmin status, since Jintikar was actively involved in the litigation to acquire Brahmin status for the ambiguously positioned *Gurav* caste, to which he belonged.[12] As Naregal observes, and as we shall see in later chapters, this elevation of Patthe Bapurao, an upper-caste artist, as the most canonical exponent of *tamasha* has had enduring impact on the modern trajectory and historiography of this art form.

The gulf between Jintikar's self-presentation, as the savior of the masses, and his archival obscurity as a supplementary footnote, is in part an artifact of the zealous postman's own hubris; however, this gulf also reflects the vast historical and ideological discontinuities in the study of cultural regulation, especially as it relates to the *tamasha* case. While Jintikar is a minor player in the long history of *tamasha* censorship, he had one critical contribution: a magazine issue he published on the subject of *tamasha* in 1948.

II. A Special Issue: Popular Periodicals and Public Concern

Background

When the *tamasha* ban was introduced by the Bombay government in April 1947, it was first implemented through an internal memo sent to the Police Commissioner of Mumbai city, and a few months later, to the District Magistrate of the Province, without offering any notice to the artists

[12] Naregal, "Marginality," 33-39.

themselves. The public announcement of the ban came in the form of a circular published in a few Marathi newspapers in July 1947, which did not provide any rationale for the government's actions. As a result, the ban provoked resistance on two counts: due to the foreseen economic and cultural consequences of this action, as well the lack of transparency by the government in its handling of the situation. This perceived opacity was opposed through a vociferous publication campaign, where several eminent literary scholars and artists wrote articles to raise awareness on the subject of *tamasha*, demand accountability, and publicly denounce the ban. While these cultural commentators were by no means *tamasha* artists themselves, it would seem that they were solicited by the *tamasha* community to write on their behalf, because such an intervention would gain greater visibility, and be more effective in mobilizing public support and pressuring the government.[13] Despite these seemingly philanthropic intentions, the content and tone of some of these articles, as we shall see in later sections, betray the extreme elitism and deep-seated casteism of their authors. Many prominent literary and cultural periodicals of the time – like *Mauj, Navbharat, Jaihind, Anil, Sahyadri* – commissioned and published these pieces. By the mid-twentieth century, these kind of periodical publications had garnered vast popularity and readership in Marathi, as in various other languages across the country.[14] Such magazines, as studies by Shobna Nijhawan, Francesca Orsini, Avinash Kumar, Anindita Ghosh and others have shown, had a long history of framing public opinion around specific topical subjects, especially through their special issues.[15] It is hardly surprising then,

[13] I am grateful to Bhushan Korgaonkar for this information.
[14] In fact two of these magazines, *Navbharat* and *Jaihind* were launched in the same year as the ban, i.e. in 1947, though the latter one only lasted a year, until 1948.
[15] For instance, in his excellent essay, Avinash Kumar demonstrates how a controversial special issue of the Hindi magazine *Chand*, "the Phansi Ank" was critical in framing public discourse on the issue of capital punishment and revolutionary activity. Avinash Kumar, "Nationalism as Bestseller: The Case of *Chand*'s 'Phansi Ank,'" in *Moveable Type: Book History in India*, eds. Abhijit Gupta and Swapan Chakravorty (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008): 172-199. See also Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Shobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012); Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print:*

that *tamasha* too became the subject of a special issue, namely the "*Tamasha Vishesh Ank*" of *Shaiv Samachar,* edited by Jintikar himself. The difficulty of locating any archival references or back issues of *Shaiv Samachar* is itself telling, for the history of Marathi periodical publication is an otherwise well-researched and catalogued phenomenon.[16] This lack may perhaps attest to a limited readership and circulation, but all the same, by 1948, the magazine had already been in print for five years, and with the Tamasha *Vishesh Ank*, it shot into public view.

The Issue

Much like Jintikar's other literary endeavors, the Tamasha Vishesh Ank too was a commemoration of his mentor, bearing the full title *Shaiv Samachar: In Memory of the Late Patthe Bapurao Kulkarni, A Tamasha Special Issue.* Published in April 1948, this issue was intended as a direct response to the ban, and was timed to coincide with a *tamasha* symposium presided by Shankarrao Godaji Gore. The editorial note by Jintikar presents the special issue as a representation of the prevailing sentiment among various *tamasha* artists who unanimously opposed the ban:

> The Bombay Government had declared a ban to stop all kinds of *tamashas* across Maharashtra. There was a meeting held among all *tamasha* artists at Aryabhushan Theatre in Ganesh Peth to call for the ban to be rescinded. At that assembly, my dear friend and colleague Mr. Dadasaheb Mirashi gave us an assurance that 'I will lobby for the ban to be lifted in my newspaper, and I will prepare a special issue on *tamasha*.' In fact, he did publish such an issue, but it was not arranged and illustrated as it should have been. That is why I ventured to publish this *Tamasha Vishesh Ank*. My knowledge of *tamasha* is exhaustive. I have spent many years in the company of the late Patthe Bapurao Kulkarni, and so I know what hardships he faced. All of this is known to me.[17]

Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778-1905 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[16] "Niyatkalike," *Marathi Vishwakosh*, ed. Lakshmanashastri Joshi, n.d., vishwakosh.marathi.gov.in/19681/.

[17] Bapusaheb Jintikar, "Sampadikiya," in *Shaiv Samachar Tamasha Visheshank* 5, no. 5 (April 1948), 1.

The editorial concludes with a call for *tamasha* festivals to be organized across various cities, in order to commemorate Patthe Bapurao, and to bring *tamasha* artists together and collectively resolve their problems. By equating the hazards confronting the largely lower-caste *tamasha* community to those faced by the popular, celebrated (albeit later impoverished) Brahmin artist, Jintikar's invocations projected Patthe Bapurao – who already enjoyed "mythic status," among the Marathi literati – as both the representative victim and the posthumous savior of the increasingly imperiled, subaltern art form of *tamasha*, and as an ambassador for the various efforts undertaken by disenfranchised *tamasha* artists to self-organize and advocate for their rights.[18]

In keeping with the standard special issue format, the *Tamasha Vishesh Ank* consisted of different genres of writing around the titular topic, ranging from vehement think-pieces and scholarly essays, to hagio-biographies of legendary *tamasgirs* like Honaji Bala, Anant Fandi, Prabhakar, Ram Joshi (and needless to say, Patthe Bapurao), profiles of various *tamasha* and *lavani* artists and groups active in Maharashtra, accompanied by several photographs and illustrations. This motley collection spanned about a hundred pages, leading one well-wisher to comment that through this issue, "*Shaiv Samachar* has carved a special place for itself in the history of Marathi periodicals." Apparently, the significance of these pages was not just limited to their rhetorical import, for according to Jintikar's own testimony, he presented a copy of the magazine to the state authorities, who "read the life stories published in the *Vishesh Ank* and were so moved by pity that they then annulled the ban."[19] The Tamasha Special Issue, thus, was allegedly the clinching piece of evidence that precipitated a crucial legislative action that affected thousands of lives. Given Jintikar's penchant for hyperbolic recollection, these claims are best taken with a very generous pinch of salt. However,

[18] Veena Naregal, "Performance, caste, aesthetics: The Marathi *sangeet natak* and the dynamics of cultural marginalisation," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 44, nos. 1-2 (2010): 85.
[19] Bapusaheb Jintikar, *Patthe Bapurao Kulkarni Krut Gan-Gavlan-Lavanya-Powade* (Pune: self-published, 1977), 157.

such implications about the magazine's efficacious relationship with the "real world" are encoded within the very format and composition of the *Vishesh Ank*. The issue's professed function is documentation, and in that regard, it still remains an impressive and extensive archival record of practitioners of a popular, oral tradition. The artists' profiles vary in size and format, ranging from a short paragraph, to two full pages, and in many cases, they describe a family or troupe ("party") of performers along with photographs. It also worth noting that unlike other special issues of its ilk, the *Tamasha Vishesh Ank* contains no fictional or literary pieces: there are no short stories, and not even any poetry, a particularly conspicuous elision given that the *lavani,* an integral (and controversial) part of *tamasha*, is essentially a poetic genre.[20] In fact, while the feature articles acknowledge that *tamasha* is an art form in its own right, they tend to valorize its edifying potential, rather than its literary or aesthetic merit; even the most erudite of these essays, by Abasaheb Mujumdar, glosses the various contexts and styles in which *lavani* is performed, but makes virtually no reference to the literary aspects of the form.[21] Presumably, this inattention to aesthetic matters reflects and reinforces the *Vishesh Ank's* self-positioning as a vehicle of pragmatic and quotidian concerns. The polemical opinion pieces, contributed by leading intellectuals and cultural critics of the time, primarily consist of demands and recommendations. Unlike other components of the special issue, the impact of these few articles was immediate, enduring, and historically verifiable.

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[20] Despite being a poetic genre, *lavani* has rarely been accorded literary merit in most scholarly accounts. As Gangadhar Morje notes, studies of lavani mostly focus on issues of etymology, or use them as ethnographic sources. Alternatively, they research the devotional or philosophical idea expressed in these compositions, or attempt to demonstrate the vulgarity and obscenity of *lavanis.* Gangadhar Morje, *Marathi Lavani Vanmaya* (Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan, 1999), 9. Most other special issues invariably devoted some of their pages to literary and fiction pieces. For instance the *Chand* "Phansi Ank" featured fictional representations of hanging etc. Of course it is possible that *tamasha* is not amenable to fictionalization in the same way really, but it is worth noting that *tamasha* artists and their lives emerged as the subject of many feature films from the 1930s onwards.

[21] Mujumdar, "Tamashakadehi Laksha Asu Dya," in Bapusaheb Jintikar, ed., *Shaiv Samachar Tamasha Visheshank* 5, no. 5 (April 1948).

The Issues

Taken as a whole, the rhetoric of the *Tamasha Vishesh Ank* constellated around four central conceits: (i) demands for governmental accountability, (ii) the defense of *tamasha* as an essential part of Marathi culture, (iii) prognoses of the potential social and cultural repercussions of the ban, and (iv) recommendations for alternatives to the ban. These found articulation in different registers among the various contributors – which included P.K. Atre, Datto Vaman Potdar, S.N. Datar, S.G. Shrotri, Bapurao Korhalkar, and Shankar Lakshman Deshpande – with some degree of internal disagreement. The kind of indeterminate ultimatums posed in Korhalkar's article "Some Direct Questions for the Opposers of Tamasha," which demands that the state "clearly explain the reasons for the ban," is echoed in virtually every opinion piece, as is the idea that "*tamasha* is an ancient cultural institution of Maharashtra."[22] Most articles also predict that the ban will result in large-scale unemployment; Atre, for instance, observes that about ten thousand people have been rendered jobless through the ban, and of this number, approximately half belong to the already disenfranchised "untouchable" or "lower" castes.[23] This issue of demographic composition, however, emerges as a contentious point, revealing the elitist, and fundamentally casteist, prejudice of its authors. This is instantiated by Potdar, whose article – written entirely in point form – rues that "since this excellent, ancient medium of edification and entertainment has remained the sole purview of the lower classes, it has not improved and progressed as it should have." While Potdar

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[22] Bapurao Korhalkar, "Some Direct Questions for the Opposers of Tamasha," in Bapusaheb Jintikar, ed., *Shaiv Samachar Tamasha Visheshank* 5, no. 5 (April 1948), 44.
[23] P.K. Atre, "Shringar Rasa Jivan Sansaarmadhil Madhuratam Rasa," in Bapusaheb Jintikar, ed., *Shaiv Samachar Tamasha Visheshank* 5, no. 5 (April 1948), 3.

still bothers to frame his remarks through the euphemism of class ["*varga*"], Shrotri is much more explicit about his views, asserting:

> Our beloved lord Parmeshwara gave rise to the four castes [*jatis*] of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, from his colossal form. [24] They each go about their own caste-based occupation in accordance with their status, and devote a moment or two of their time to some form of entertainment. Since Shudras are illiterate, they created *tamasha* according to their [limited] intelligence. What is their fault in this?[25]

Such vituperative arguments are apparently intended as expressions of support, for Shrotri goes on to rhetorically ask: "Harijans have now been granted entry into temples. In the same way, why can't the status of *tamasha* also be raised?"[26] This idea that *tamasha* can be improved to meet societal standards has particular purchase in Potdar's piece, where he claims that "it is the responsibility of the government and the public to expel any defects that have infiltrated or become associated with the form," and in order to do so, he appeals to the state "to abandon any plans to ban this institution," suggesting instead they set up "a committee to conduct a comprehensive inquiry into *tamasha*," further recommending the creation of a "Tamasha Censor Board" that would "prohibit or curb any potentially objectionable elements."[27] It would appear that Potdar's proposals, in particular, gained a great deal of traction, undoubtedly in part due to his reigning status as a "*Mahamahopadhyaya,*" or a laureated scholar of eminence.[28] In adherence to his suggestions, the

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[24] This is reference to the origin myth described in the Rig Veda, according to which the four castes emerged from the different body parts of the primal male or Purush: Brahmins emerged from the head, Kshatriyas from the hands, Vaishyas from the thighs and Shudras from the feet. The Marathi term that Shrotri uses is *jati,* which clearly refers to caste.

[25] S.G. Shrotri, "Kurhadiche Dande, Garibanche Kal," in *Shaiv Samachar Tamasha Visheshank* 5, no. 5 (April 1948): 53.

[26] "Harijans" (lit: people of God) is another term for Dalits, popularized by M.K. Gandhi, but rarely used as a label of self-identification. Dalits were (are) not allowed to enter Hindu temples because the dominant castes consider this to be a defilement of the sacred space. This is was one of the anti-caste struggles led by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in the early 20th century,

[27] Datto Vaman Potdar, "Tamashana avashya sandhi dili pahije," in Bapusaheb Jintikar, ed., *Shaiv Samachar Tamasha Visheshank* 5, no. 5 (April 1948), 5.

[28] This was an honorific title bestowed upon prestigious scholars by the Government. Potdar

government appointed an official "Tamasha Sudharana Committee" (Committee on Tamasha Reforms) in August 1948, presided by none other than Datto Vaman Potdar himself. This committee conducted its investigation and made a number of official recommendations to government, one of which, unsurprisingly, was the formation of a Censor Board for Tamasha. The establishment of the Tamasha Sudharana Committee – and Potdar's remarks that precipitated it – catalyzed a new kind of remedial discourse around *tamasha*, centered on rhetoric of "sudharana" or "reform." This discourse, as we shall see in the following chapters of the dissertation, was consolidated through the 1960s and 1970s, and induced a fundamental shift in the demographic of *tamasha* performers and audiences, the venues in which they performed, their artistic repertoire, and the very form of *tamasha* itself.

III. Remedial Apparatuses of the State

The Committee on Tamasha Reforms

The reformist agenda of the state-appointed Tamasha Sudharana Committee is evident in the title itself, and also reflected in the stated aims of the Committee: "a) to inquire into the undesirable elements that have entered *tamasha*, and b) to make recommendations to the government about how *tamasha* can be reformed in order to make it a wholesome form of entertainment."[29] The Committee – which, consisted of five core members, all writers and/or

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received it in 1946. Potdar was actively involved in many other such projects of cultural conservation, most notably as a prominent exponent of the Bharat Itihas Samsodhak Mandal (Association of Researchers in Indian History). For more on Potdar's involvement with this Association, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[29] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 1948, 1.

academics, namely, Prof. D.V. Potdar, Prof. N. R. Phatak, B.V. Varerkar, G.L. Thokal, and Sopandev Chaudhari, with M.N. Sahasrabuddhe, a prominent folklorist, serving as the secretary – formally began operations in October 1948 out of an office in Pune; its workings were later compiled and published in the form of a report.

In order to conduct their "comprehensive inquiry," the Committee adopted a two-fold approach. The first entailed watching *tamasha* performances at various venues, beginning with a show at Aryabhushan Theatre in Pune on November 12, 1948, where they also met with the theatre manager and artists. Additionally, the members of the committee individually attended *tamashas* in other parts of Bombay Province, such as Kolhapur, Sangli and Mumbai. In all these places, the report states, they watched performances "without revealing any affiliation to the Committee, as a common audience member. The reason for this was to witness the standard proceeding of these shows, rather than with any precautionary measures taken for the sake of the committee. In this way, we were able to observe the usual form of *tamasha* performance."

The personal observations gathered through these field visits clearly provide the foundational basis for the Committee's framing of the *tamasha* problem, and the strategies it suggests to alleviate it. However, these proposals acquire legitimacy through the Committee's apparent solicitation of "public opinion," to which the second part of the inquiry was dedicated. This was achieved, in part, through the publication of a pamphlet detailing the mandate of the Committee, so as to "draw the attention of our contemporary public intellectuals towards this issue." This pamphlet was then circulated within newspapers, among *tamasha* troupes and some special experts. It invited "any person or institution" to share "information, opinions, suggestions, observations etc." on a range of suggested topics, such as evidence of "the faults or offences in the compositions, dialogues etc. currently used in *tamashas*" and "the undesirable elements used in language or presentation for

the sake of humorous effect;" as well as examples of existing or new literature that "uphold the culture of Maharashtrian society and can be easily understood by rural populations," and so on. While this list is not intended to be exhaustive, it largely consists of such leading and loaded "suggestions," that preempt and invite a specific kind of response.[30]

In a similar vein, the Committee also drafted a survey questionnaire that solicited information, experience and opinions on a number of *tamasha*-related concerns. It included questions such as: What are the differences between old and new kinds of *tamashas*? How long should *tamasha* performances go on? Should there be separate theatres for *tamasha*? What are the new reforms that can be implemented for *tamashas*? How are *tamasha* troupes formed? What class of people usually populate these troupes? This survey was distributed among a sample population of 507 participants, of which state and state-affiliated officials formed the majority (60%). Tamasha artists and workers constituted only 18% of the sample, while journalists, scholars and litterateurs made up the rest. As this sample distribution attests, and as the report clearly states, the committee primarily sought representatives who could speak on behalf of the "largely uneducated, rural populations" – in the capacity of social workers and/or knowledgeable experts – rather than prioritizing the opinions of these affected populations themselves. In any case, the survey did not prove to be much of a success, generating only 49 responses, of which an overwhelming majority were from those in the employ of local and state governmental and affiliated organizations. Despite this sampling bias and limited response, the survey was repeatedly cited to support many of the recommendations put forth by the Committee.

The report also notes that in conducting their inquiry, the Committee referred to a number of articles and special issues on *tamasha*. Needless to say, the *Shaiv Samachar Tamasha Vishesh Ank*

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[30] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal."

features prominently in this list, as do essays published in other magazines, including those written by Potdar, Varerkar, and Sahasrabuddhe, who served on the Committee. While their literary output on the subject of *tamasha* perhaps testifies to these authors' suitability for the task assigned to them, it further underscores the fact that the Committee, in effect, consulted themselves! It is hardly surprising, then, that the official recommendations of the committee largely echo the concerns raised in the *Tamasha Vishesh Ank* discussed above. Many of these recommendations, thus, address the allegedly "undesirable" elements within *tamasha* that were deemed to be need of reform, such as the practice of *daulatjada* or bidding for songs performed by female *lavani* dancers. This was a cause for concern because the offer of the bid was often used as a pretext to touch the dancers and interrupt their performances. While the Committee was of the opinion that *daulatjada* had little to do with encouraging the arts and was simply a an excuse for improper contact, they contend – in keeping with popular opinion as expressed in the survey – that the practice be allowed to continue provided that there is no bodily contact and no interruptions. Yet another issue raised by the Committee was the practice of women *lavani* dancers sitting at the entrance of *tamashas* to entice viewers, which was "rampant in cities." The Committee, again in deference to public opinion, recommends abolishing this custom, noting that it "upsets the natural modesty of women."[31] The most significant recommendation of the report, however, has to do with state regulation on *tamasha*. While roundly denouncing the ban, the Committee also notes that *tamasha* is in urgent need of oversight and reform, that the existing mechanisms for *tamasha* licensing and control lack standardization; and thus strongly advocate the formation of a Tamasha Censor Board for this purpose.

[31] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," 11.

Tamasha Censor Board

The idea of a dedicated censor board for *tamasha* – first proposed, as noted above, by Potdar in *Shaiv Samachar*[32] – was raised as a matter of debate in the Committee's survey: "Along the lines of the existing Censor Board for cinema, would it be beneficial for the government to establish a censor board for *tamasha*? If so, what kind of composition, duties and authority should it have?" It would appear that the twenty-four respondents who answered these questions voted overwhelmingly in favor of this idea. It is telling that the model for this proposed body was the film censor board, for the latter, too, was undergoing a process of overhaul and centralization to conform to new postcolonial standards. In fact, the trajectory of the formation of the Indian Central Board of Film Censors (CBFC) ideologically and chronologically mirrors that of the Tamasha Censor Board in compelling ways. In August 1949, the government of India appointed a "Film Inquiry Committee" under the chairmanship of S.K. Patil, a member of the constituent assembly, with a two-fold agenda that echoes, almost verbatim, the mandate of the *tamasha* inquiry committee that was constituted exactly a year prior. It was directed to "(a) examine the growth and organization of the film industry in India, and two indicate the lines on which further development should be directed and (b) to examine what measure should be adopted to enable films in India to develop into an effective instrument for promotion of national culture, education and healthy entertainment." Interestingly, the Film Inquiry Committee's investigations seem to have arrived at the inverse conclusion, and its report dismissed the need for a censor board, asserting the "competence of the industry itself to regulate and control."[33] Overall, however, the Film Inquiry Committee had far less

[32] The proposal for a Tamasha Censor Board was also simultaneously put forth by V.D. Sathe in an article in *Navbharat* in April 1948. He even recommended names of people who could potentially be included in such a Board. V.D. Sathe, "Tamashache Loknatyatil Sthan," *Navbharat* 3 (April 1948): 13-18.

[33] Someswar Bhowmik, "From Coercion to Power Relations: Film Censorship in Post-Colonial India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 30 (26 July 2003): 3149.

influence than its *tamasha* counterpart, and its report, in Monika Mehta's words, "was left to gather dust by the Indian government whose interest in the recommendations far outstripped its zeal in their implementation."[34] Consequently, state censorship on film continued into the post-independence period, unified under the CBFC in 1951, to censor and certify films in accordance with the Indian Cinematograph Act of 1952. The new Censorship Rules of 1953 were drafted under the aegis of this act.

Around the same time, in 1953, the provincial government appointed a "Board for the Prior Scrutiny of Tamashas, Melas and Ras in the State of Bombay," under the Bombay Police Act 1951, which came to known as the Tamasha Censor Board.[35] In the wake of the ban, *tamasha* performances had been controlled under Rules 262 and 46 for "The Public Performance of Tamashas," which, essentially, authorized the Police Commissioner or District Magistrate to refuse licenses for performances that were adjudged to "be indecent or of scurrilous character," contain "offensive personalities," and so on. With the formation of the Tamasha Censor Board, which officially began functioning in 1954 under the chairmanship of Professor M.R. Palande (who was then the Executive Editor and Secretary of the Bombay District Gazetteers Editorial Board), these licensing systems were standardized, centralized, and more strictly enforced. As recommended in the Tamasha Sudharana Committee's report, the Censor Board was composed of six "non-governmental members" who were deemed to "be knowledgeable about *tamasha* performance," but expressly excluded individuals "who themselves work in the *tamasha* occupation."[36] The existing

[34] Monika Mehta, *Censorship and Sexuality in Bombay Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 34. For more on the Film Inquiry Committee's immediate and enduring impact, see Rochona Majumdar, "Art Cinema: The Indian Career of a Global Category," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 3 (2016): 580-610; Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Epic Melodrama: Themes of Nationality in Indian Cinema," *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, no. 25–26 (1993): 55-70.
[35] The Censor Board was formed under Section 33 (1)(wa)(iii) of the Bombay Police Act, 1951.
[36] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," 11. The other members of the Censor Board were Dr. Sarojini Babar, Ms. Sarojini Kamatnurkar, Ms. Jyotsnaben Shukla, Mr. Jhinabhai Desai, Mr. H.R.

interim licensing rules for *tamasha* were then replaced by the "Greater Bombay Public Amusement Performance Board Rules," drafted and enforced in 1955. In accordance with these rules, *tamasha* parties or troupes had to register with the Board to acquire a performance license, submit a written script for scrutiny two months prior to performances, on the basis of which they would be issued a "Certificate of Suitability" specifying any cuts and deletions decreed by the Censor Board.

The Politics of Preservation

While the extensive criteria for potentially objectionable content – which ranged from "incit[ing] or encourag[ing] any person to commit murder or any offence involving violence" to the "grossly indecent, scurrilous or obscene" – was itself a major hindrance, the real setback for *tamasha* performers was the stipulation for written scripts. Much of *tamasha* performance is spontaneous and impromptu; the demand for a written text was not only an encumbrance, but was perceived as a threat to the essentially improvisatory nature of this art. P.K. Atre, for instance, staunchly opposed the idea of a Censor Board on the grounds that "to force *tamasha* into a scripted and bookish form is to strangle the art form and take its life," adding that "for the white-collared, educated sections of society to mount such an unjust an oppressive attack" is "nothing short of a crime."[37] The Board, however, maintained that such fears were unfounded, and in fact, inaccurate. Reflecting on the Board's work in 1962, the Chairman writes:

> So far the Board has scrutinized hundreds of scripts. It has been the experience of the Board that while writing scripts of *vags* [*tamasha* skits], the *tamasgirs* give only a bare outline of the *vags* together with the lyrics. Such scripts have been accepted by the Board knowing full well that it is very difficult to prepare detailed scripts of *vags* whose dialogues are mostly extempore. There is, therefore, no fear of spontaneity and quick repartee in *tamasha* being adversely affected by its scripting. These elements have already

Mahajani, and Mr. G.R. Nalavadi.

[37] Atre, "Shringar Ras," 5-6.

been preserved even after complying with regulations. On the contrary, it can be said that the prior scrutiny of *tamasha* scripts has resulted in *preserving all that is best, healthy and creative in the art of tamasha* while eliminating all the demoralising aberrations which had completely *perverted its original form* and made it almost a social evil.[38]

This rhetoric of preservation pervades censorial discourse on *tamasha*, such that censorship is consistently posited as a preservatory, rather than prohibitive force. In some ways, the Censor Board was in a literal sense the savior of *tamasha*, since it emerged as an alternative to a blanket ban. Moreover, the roster of written scripts and the register of entries maintained by the Tamasha Board, while by no means uniform or comprehensive, constitute the most extensive documentary record of *tamasha* activity in the post-independence decades. The paradox of *tamasha* censorship, thus, is that durable archives of *tamasha* exist only because they were subject to state scrutiny. These archives have proved to be indispensable for the study of *tamasha* in the postcolonial period, providing both text and context for scholarship on the subject. Sudam Jadhav's work on the literary style and output of *tamasha* skits, for instance, traces shifts in the popular appeal of this genre by tabulating and aggregating the number of scripts submitted for scrutiny, at the same time acknowledging that the availability of these texts for literary analysis is completely contingent on the vagaries of the Board. His findings also reveal that the most number of *tamasha* skits (approximately 1000-1500) were published between 1954-1974, years that coincide exactly with the heyday of the Censor Board.[39]

The seeming antinomy of censorial records serving as archival repositories is, of course, a familiar one, that has parallels in other several other cultures and contexts. In most cases, such archives are regarded as the only fortuitous legacy of an otherwise brutal and repressive regime. This

[38] "Letter no. Est. 162/2709," Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai.

[39] Sudam Jadhav, *Loknatya Swaroop* (Aurangabad: Sulaba Prakashan, 1992), 4, 76. Munja Dhondge's study on the literary output of *tamasha* in the post-independence decades also uses the censor files as primary data to argue – contrary to the quote above – that because of the imposition of written scripts, *tamasha* began to acquire a monotonous, uniform quality in the later decades of the twentieth century. See Dhondge, "Swatantryotar Kalakhandatil," 112.

approach is reflected in many recent studies of dramatic censorship, such as Gomes and Casadei's quantitative survey of theater censorship in Brazil under dictatorial rule, and Raquel Merino Alvarez's Censored Translations Project affiliated with Spanish censorship archives.[40] However, what distinguishes the *tamasha* case is that here, censorship was not framed as a tactic of surveillance and silencing, but its opposite. The systematized apparatus of the Tamasha Censor Board was envisioned as an antidote to, rather than an extension of, the willful autocracy of the State.

This understanding of censorship as preservative was fundamentally rooted in the notion that the current, undesirable form of *tamasha* was a corruption – or in the Censor Board's language, a "perversion" – of its mythical, authentic, "original form." The primary task of the Censor Board, thus, was to reform *tamasha* to restore it to its original glory. This was in keeping with the Reforms Committee's recommendation that "the government must realize that nurturing and reforming *tamasha* is essential for the benefit of the common masses."[41] As in the case of the debates over the reform of *devadasi sadir* dance, which was concretized into the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act in 1947, and as we shall see in the next chapter, the chief strategy for such "reform" was to raise the status of these subaltern art forms by making them amenable to middle-class production and consumption. However, unlike the so-called "temple dance" of the *devadasis*, *tamasha* had virtually no sacred or religious associations on the basis of which it could be elevated. There were some concerted attempts in the 1950s to generate histories of *tamasha* and *lavani* that emphasized and/or reinvented its connections to the somewhat secular and subaltern, but nonetheless revered, Marathi *santsahitya* or saintly literature. It is hardly a coincidence that at least a few articles of this ilk were authored by none other than Sahasrabuddhe, the secretary of the Censor

[40] Catherine O'Leary, Diego Santos Sánchez, and Michael Thompson, eds., *Global Insights on Theatre Censorship* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
[41] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," 12.

Board, in 1953.[42] These intermittent attempts notwithstanding, the few quasi-devotional elements within *tamasha*, as we shall see shortly, only served to further inflame, rather than alleviate, bourgeois anxieties about the profanity of this art form. For this reason, the remedial measures implemented by the state tended to hinge on and foreground the educational and heritage value of *tamasha*.

At the same time, the Censor Board – despite being borne of a Committee that had a titularly reformist agenda – maintained that "The Board's censorship is not guided and regulated by any puritanical or even reformist doctrines; it is concerned only with ensuring that the well-being of society is not adversely affected by a public display of that coarse vulgarism and sheer obscenity which are abhorrent to the sense of decency of even the common man and woman, or by incitement, whether direct or insidious, to acts of physical violence to person and property."[43] Such internal contradictions and disclaimers are symptomatic of the ambiguities inherent in the censorial discourse around *tamasha*. Right from the original ban of 1947, to the inquiry of the Reforms Committee and up to the constitution of the Tamasha Censor Board, it is not readily apparent what precisely is morally objectionable about *tamasha* that makes it tantamount to a "social evil." Terms like "erotic," "obscene," "vulgar," "scurrilous" were repeatedly invoked, often interchangeably, but also, equally, to designate categorically different meanings. While some of these semantic irregularities are owed to the vagaries of translation – much of the periodical literature on *tamasha* and the report of the Reforms Committee is in Marathi, while the Licensing Rules and the

[42] For instance, Sahasrabuddhe published two articles in this vein entitled "Shahiratle Sangeet" and "Shivshakti-Kalgitura-Gangaulan" in *Satyakatha* in June and August 1953 respectively. This kind of sacralizing of *tamasha* is most overtly attempted in a 1972 play by Ashok Paranjpe titled *Aatun Kirtan, Varun Tamasha* ("*Kirtan* on the Outside, *Tamasha* on the Inside"), where the conceit is that *tamasha* is simply another form of *kirtan,* a genre of devotional music. The title of the play is derived from one of Patthe Bapurao's compositions. Ashok Paranjpe, *Aatun Kirtan, Varun Tamasha* (Mumbai: Parachure Prakashan Mandir (1974).
[43] "Tamasha Board and Its Work," Directorate of Publicity. Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 3.

proceedings of the Tamasha Censor Board are almost entirely in English – they also point to the purposeful obfuscations that persisted across the various modes of state regulation on *tamasha*.

IV. Shifting Signifiers: Obscene / Vulgar / Erotic

When lifting the ban on *tamasha* in 1948, the government of Bombay circulated a memo expressing its concern about the "*ashleel"* and "*gramya*" elements inherent in this art form. The Tamasha Reforms Committee, in their report, makes note of the vagueness of this vocabulary, providing parenthetic English translations of these words as "obscene" and "vulgar" respectively; it also observes that one of the chief tasks of the Committee is to investigate and clarify the scope and meaning of these terms. While the Committee broadly concurs with the existing prohibition on "obscene or scurrilous" content (as codified in the "Rules for the Public Performance of Tamashas"),[44] it expresses grave concern at the government's introduction of a new term into the mix: namely *gramya* or vulgar, remarking that "these terms are not synonymous. The Committee acknowledges the difference between these two words [i.e. obscene and vulgar], and it is solely on the basis of this difference that it upholds the prohibition on obscenity."[45] While these terms sound fairly approximate in contemporary English, the rendering of *gramya* as "vulgar" in the Committee's report seems to refer to the now obsolete sense of the latter term, connoting "of the country" or rustic. [46] Indeed, this distinction was critical, as the Committee explains:

> The class of *tamasha* spectators is rural and uneducated. They don't understand the urban dialect. They are inclined to enjoy compositions written in a rural language; if

[44] As we will recall, the interim licensing rules 262 and 46 called for a resale of licenses for "indecent and scurrilous" performances. In the Marathi rendering of these rules in the report, the words used are "*ashleel*" and "*kilasvana*" respectively.
[45] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," 2.
[46] The word vulgar also has a sense of "belonging to the ordinary or common class in the community, esp. the uneducated or ignorant." See "vulgar, n.," *OED Online*.

> these compositions are written in a style that is most comprehensible to these populations, it would be unfair to forbid them solely on that basis. Rusticity of language alone cannot be considered a fault. The grounds for obscenity must be determined contextually […] if any depiction portrayed in a rustic tongue does not seem repulsive to a common, respectable rural person, then it cannot be deemed to be obscene.[47]

In accordance with this stance, the original General Principles of the Tamasha Censor Board, drafted in 1953, contained a provision to the effect that "descriptions that are not revolting to a common rural man shall not be considered obscene."[48] It was not clear how this stipulation would logistically be implemented; it was ultimately dropped from the updated Public Amusement Rules of 1955.[49]

However, this trope of the proverbial "common rural man" continued to circulate and inform the discourse on censorship in complex ways. On the one hand, as we have seen in previous sections, the illiteracy and presumed backwardness of this "rural man," makes him particularly predisposed towards obscene content, and thus in need of censorship and reform, much like the proverbial "pissing man" that Mazzarella describes in the context of film censorship.[50] On the other hand, this illiteracy and backwardness also uniquely positions the "rural man" (notionally, if not in actual practice) to be the best judge of what legitimately qualifies as obscene. The same illiteracy also presents a logistical hurdle to censorship, for how can "barely literate" *tamasha* artists be expected to submit written scripts?[51] While this latter position did not have any tangible impact in terms of

[47] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," 11.

[48] "Resolution No. 2701/5-Poll," Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 9.

[49] Interestingly, the definitional battles between obscene vs vulgar continues to resurface in India, most recently in 2015, there was a high-profile case against the popular comedy group All India Bakchod (AIB), which was eventually dismissed on the grounds that it was "vulgar not obscene." However, in this case, there is no sense of vulgar having anything to do with ruralness. See Vinaya Deshpande, "Language of AIB vulgar, not obscene: HC," *The Hindu*, 17 February 2015, thehindu.com/news/national/language-of-aib-vulgar-not-obscene-hc/article6902580.ece.

[50] Mazzarella, *Censorium*, 12-15.

[51] "'Tamasha' in the City," *Times of India,* 31 March 1969.

legislation, it reflects and reiterates an idea that continues to have great purchase even today across a range of different contexts, namely, that the standards of morality and obscenity are different between urban and rural, educated and uneducated populations. In the case of *tamasha*, this idea was deployed to advocate both in favor of, as well as against, censorship and reform.

Yet another Indic term that has purchase in this context is *shringar* or the erotic mood in literature, which is also related to, but distinct from the obscene. As per the classical Sanskrit *rasa* theory, *shringar* is an aesthetic category that relates to love, beauty, romance, attraction, and so on, and is often referred to as the king among the nine *rasas*.[52] The ways in which the differences between *shringar* (erotic) and *ashleel* (obscene) are usually glossed with respect to *tamasha* is explored at length in the following chapter. However, it is extremely significant that the term *shringar* (or any equivalent English translation) is virtually absent within the early censorial discourse around *tamasha*, especially since *vinod* and *shringar* (the comedic and erotic respectively) came to be lauded as the essential components of *tamasha* from the 1960s onwards. The term *shringar* is barely invoked in either the Report of the Tamasha Sudharana Committee or the Censor Board documents; given that *shringar* is essentially a high literary category, its conspicuous absence is further evidence of the prevailing reluctance to acknowledge *tamasha* as having any literary merit. Predictably, in the few instances that the term *shringar* is evoked, it is exclusively in reference to *lavani*, the most conventionally poetic component of *tamasha*. For instance, the report of the Committee notes that *shringar* is the dominant mood in the *gavalan* (the Radha-Krishna themed farce), because this component of *tamasha* primarily consists of poetic repartee through *lavanis*; however, it concludes that the depictions of Krishna's cronies accosting milkmaids "agitates the passions of the spectator;

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[52] *Shringar* is one among nine *rasas* or essences codified in classical Sanskrit aesthetic ("*Rasa*") theory. See Bharata Muni, *Natyasastra*, trans. Adya Rangacharya (Bangalore: IBH Prakashan, 1986).

this marks the inauguration of the obscene within *tamasha*." It remains unclear when and how poetic *shringar* devolves into profane and undesirable obscenity.[53]

These kinds of philological gymnastics – that attempted to identify the precise source and subject of obscenity – were more confusing than clarifying, and only served to intensify prevailing ambiguities about the actual premise for the moral outrage against *tamasha*. For, while obscenity remained the overarching theme, its scope and object seemed to change with every telling. As we have seen from Jintikar's account, one charge was that watching *tamasha* encouraged vices like gambling, drinking, smoking and so on; yet another allegation, cited repeatedly, was that "the songs in *tamasha* are very obscene, and they degrade the moral values of society;"[54] on the other hand, as the directives within various official dispatches indicate, *tamasha*'s obscenity seem to lay in the treatment of the women, particularly *lavani* dancers, who performed in them; needless to say, while women were portrayed as the prime victims in this narrative, they were never actually approached or consulted in drafting legislations intended to protect them.[55] Another grounds for *tamasha*'s depravity

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[53] It is worth noting that depictions of Radha and Krishna seem to always trouble the line between eroticism and obscenity. This is even the case with the 12th-century text *Gitgovind*, which came under puritan attack from the 19th onwards for its vivid descriptions of this relationship. As Charu Gupta observes, much of this problem is because of the apparently uncontrollable sexuality of the heroine, Radha, who is neither wife nor mother, but a sensuous and adventurous romantic figure. See Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

[54] Shivajirao Chauhan, "Aajchya Marathi Shahiranche Bhagya Vidhate," in *Patthe Bapurao Kulkarni Krut Dholkivareel Rangbaaz Lavanya*, 39.

[55] This of course is a familiar pattern from other reformist discourse around gendered issues, notably the debates around the practice of *sati* in the late-19th century. See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). On the whole, women played an interesting role in *tamasha* reform discourse. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the figure of the female spectator was essential to raising the status of *tamasha*; equally, as we see in Chapter 4, the trope of the long-suffering victim was another trope mobilized in the service of *tamasha* reform.

was that because it includes a segment that satirizes Lord Krishna, that too in ribald dialogue, it offends Hindu sentiments.[56]

From Obscenity to Sedition

To some extent, such shiftiness of meaning and context is inherent to all adjudications on obscenity, especially of the "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it" variety.[57] Additionally, in the *tamasha* case, as we have seen, the locus of moral reform consistently shifts between the performers, the spectators, the art form itself, and society at large. However, the some of these ambiguities also stem from a deliberate lack of transparency on part of the ruling Congress government. The *tamasha* ban was one among many other such blanket restrictions passed by the state, apparently aimed at improving moral standards. P.K. Atre makes note of this pattern, caustically remarking: "The ruling Congress government in Bombay Province follows Gandhian principles [of public edification], which is why it seems to be obsessed with improving public morality. It is truly our collective misfortune that instead of attending to problems of public employment, food security, education or trade and industry, the Congress government only cares to declare prohibitions: on alcohol, on polygamy, on dowry and now on *tamasha*." While Atre's vitriol stems largely from his own long-standing opposition to the Congress,[58] the government's obsession

[56] Apparently, a complaint to this effect was lodged by someone named Mr. Datta Bal in Pune in 1947, which in turn prompted the government to declare its ban. See Rustum Achalkhamb, *Tamasha Lokrangbhumi* (Pune: Sugava Prakashan, 2006), 138. A complaint to this effect was also made by Madhukar Lokhande in 1956, who wrote a play in order to rectify and modify this offensive element in *tamasha*. Madhukar Lokhande, *Shahiranchi Hajeri ani Pativrata* (Pune: V.P. Deshmukh, 1956).

[57] This expression was famously used by United Supreme Court Justice, Potter Stewart while adjudicating an obscenity case in 1964. Mazzarella terms this phenomenon "content beyond content" in the context of film (*Censorium* 56).

[58] Atre was a vocal critic of the Congress party, and regularly published pieces criticizing the government's policies in his newspaper *Maratha*. This mutual opposition intensified as Atre and the mainstream Congress leadership were on opposite sides during the Samyukta Maharashtra

with bans and prohibitions did border on the ridiculous, as instantiated by a legal injunction passed on March 16, 1948, by which "Obscenity [was] Banned for a Week!"

Naturally, such gambits inspired outrage from progressive circles, especially because many of these efforts to improve public morality were in reality thinly veiled attempts at quelling political dissent and resistance. This is evident even in reading the actual provisions of the absurd week-long obscenity ban, which prohibits "the public utterance of obscene cries or slogans or singing of obscene songs," "processions or assemblies with the object of creating noise or shouting obscene slogans or singing obscene songs," and so on. From the phrasing of these injunctions and the nature of activities listed, it is evident that "obscene" here is just a smokescreen for the seditious.[59]

Obscenity and sedition have a long and complicated history of such co-imbrication, especially within the Indian context. Much has been written about the British colonial regime's attempts to surveil and penalize what they considered to be immoral and dissident behaviors (especially from the late 19th century onwards), as well as the strategies deployed by native populations to circumvent these legal stipulations or manipulate them to serve their own local interests.[60] When "obscenity" formally emerged as a category of regulation, especially within the realm of print, in "it was understood as implicated in 'sedition,' that is, in explicitly political form of

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Movement (explained below).

[59] This becomes especially apparent in the other provisions under this injunction, which prohibits "the preparation, exhibition or dissemination of pictures, symbols, placards, or of any other object or thing which may be of a nature to outrage morality or decency, or which may probably flame religious animosity or hostility between different classes, or incite to the commission of an offence, to a disturbance of the public peace, or to resistance to or contempt of the law or of a lawful authority." "Obscenity Banned For A Week!," *Free Press Journal,* Mar. 16, 1948.

[60] Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Nandi Bhatia, *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Devika Sethi, *War Over Words: Censorship in India, 1930-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

provocation."[61] These categories have an equally long history of enmeshment in case of dramatic censorship, for the infamous Dramatic Performances Act of 1876 empowered "the several Local Governments to prohibit dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest."[62]

In the *tamasha* case, while obscenity was (and still is) perceived to be an urgent public threat in need of governmental intervention, it was also at least in part a ruse, a conveniently vague pretext, to suppress and outlaw the rising influence of the communist movement in Maharashtra from the 1920s onwards, and the mass mobilizations that were underway through the 1940s.

V. The Propaganda Problem: Red Panic and the Genre of *Loknatya*

Background: Congress and the Communists

From the 1920s onwards, the growing influence of communist thought on the political atmosphere in and around present-day Maharashtra played a critical role in mobilizing the working classes, especially within the rapidly expanding textile industry in Bombay. The workers employed in these mills, who lived and worked in the Girangaon (lit: village of the mills) locality, built a sustained labor movement that came to de dominated by a communist leadership, especially from 1928 onwards.[63] While the Communist Party of India (founded in 1925) and its regional affiliates had a

[61] Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella, *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). C.A Bayly also notes that in the crackdown on seditious content in the late 19th c, the British authorities operated on the principle that "sedition and immorality were linked." Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 340.
[62] "A Bill to Empower the Government to Prohibit Certain Dramatic Performances" in Bhatia, *Acts of Authority.*
[63] Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon, *One Hundred Years One Hundred Voices: The Millworkers of Girangaon: An Oral History* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004).

volatile and variable relationship with the British colonial state,[64] the relations between the new Indian Congress government (which came to power in Bombay in 1946) and the communists became increasingly hostile throughout the 1940s and 1950s. This mutual antagonism further intensified through the Samyukta (Unified) Maharashtra Movement, an agitation for the separate state of Maharashtra, divided on linguistic lines, with Bombay as its capital. The communists rallied in support of this movement, because it was perceived as largely progressive, securing power for working-class populations across caste, class, religious and regional boundaries (though the majority were Marathi-speaking), and challenging the Gujarati-owned capitalist-industrial nexus. The Congress leadership was staunchly opposed to the incorporation of the cosmopolitan and economically profitable city of Bombay into the state of Maharashtra, which would result in the loss of lucrative Gujarati investment in industry and trade, and sought to counteract the influence of the communists on the regional and national scale.[65]

In Bombay Province, the Congress government, on the one hand, issued a series of new legislations, prohibitions and policies to quell "the menace" of the communists, who were channeling the rising tide of discontent among the poor, laboring classes into organized strikes and mass movements. On the other hand, they also sought undermine the communist leadership by portraying them as violent, lawless, anti-Indian and opportunistic, while casting themselves as "committed, patient advocates of gradual, peaceful reform who only needed more time to bring

[64] The British colonial government routinely banned and jailed communists through the 1920s and 1930s for their "seditious" activities, but then when the communist leadership, under direction from the Comintern, did a volte-face and began supporting the Second World War effort as a "People's War," the ban on the Communist Party was lifted.

[65] The early phase of Samyukta Maharashtra Movement began in the 1940s, but the movement really gained steam in the 1950s, and ultimately culminated in the formation of a separate state of Maharashtra in 1960. Shreeyash S. Palshikar, *Breaking Bombay, Making Maharashtra: Media, Identity Politics, and State Formation in Modern India* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2007).

about positive changes."[66] The Home and Revenue Minister of Bombay, Morarji Desai, was especially vociferous in his anti-communist stance. At an address to striking *Adivasi* laborers, in Thane district in 1946, united under the communist-led Kisan Sabha, Desai asserted, "the way of the Red Flag will lead to violence and disorder. Do not be carried away by slogans, but give us time and we shall not go back on our words."[67] Under the emergency Bombay Public Security Measures Act of 1947, communist leaders were routinely rounded up, arrested and their offices raided. A report issued by the Congress government in 1951, dramatically titled "Bombay Marches On…", intended as a "Review of the Work and Activities of the Government of Bombay during the quinquennium 1946-1951," includes a section on "Communist Trouble:"

> The Communists, however, wove an intricate plan to create trouble […] They had their "cells" and they had infiltrated themselves into the ranks of students and teachers. They used culture as a handmaid of disruption and usually selected backward areas and backward tribes as their spheres of activity and targets of operations. In general, wherever they went, they left a tragic trail of misery, suffering and distress for their unsuspecting victims […] The Government had, therefore, to take special steps to meet this menace.[68]

The domain of culture – the "handmaid of disruption" – was of particular concern to the Congress government, because much of the mobilization work, especially in the industrial mill areas, was done through songs, performances, and art. While the political power and influence of communist-led unions were on the wane in the 1940s, this decade witnessed a consolidation of radical thought within the cultural sphere, especially with the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, in 1943. In Girangaon, the local communist *shahirs* or bards "did much to propagate the Party's politics amongst ordinary people."[69]

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[66] Leslie J. Calman, "Congress Confronts Communism: Thana District, 1945-47," *Modern Asian Studies* 21, no. 2 (1987): 330.
[67] Ibid., 344.
[68] *Bombay Marches On* (Bombay: Directorate of Publicity, Government of Bombay, 1951), 3.
[69] As Madhukar Nerale, the owner of Hanuman Theatre recalls in Adarkar and Menon, eds., *One*

Kalapathaks, or cultural squads, would perform political songs and *tamashas* to pull crowds to public meetings. Many of these songs and scenes – which usually focused on the problems of workers who lived in the area – would be hummed, recited and shared long after the meetings had ended, and were a critical tool in fostering revolutionary zeal among the mill workers. There were several *kala pathaks* and *shahirs* active in the area, such as Shahir Sable, Narayan Surve, Sheikh Jainu Chand, and so on, however, the most popular and influential was the Lal Bawta Kala Pathak (Red Flag Cultural Squad) started by Annabhau Sathe, Amar Sheikh and D.N. Gavankar in 1943, and overtly affiliated with the Communist Party. Annabhau Sathe, a prolific poet and performer, wrote a number of skits, sketches and songs for the Lal Bawta's *tamashas*; many of these, like *Akalechi Goshta, Deshbhakta Ghotale,* and *Shethjicha Election,* portray the collective strength of class-conscious workers and directly satirize the ruling Congress government and its pro-capitalist policies. It is hardly surprising, then, that the government sought to curb these performances, and the *tamasha* ban of 1947 was a decisive attempt in that direction.

The Propaganda Problem

The censorial discourse around *tamasha*, as we have seen, mostly centered on the issue of obscenity, as did the numerous reform measures recommended and implemented by the various stakeholders in these debates. However, the concern around propaganda haunts these exchanges despite, or perhaps through, its conscious elisions, as evident in the government's equivocal non-disclosures, in Atre's insinuating jibes, and most obviously in the report of the Tamasha Reforms Committee. The subject of political *tamasha* performance is raised almost as a post-script in the report, "discussed only so that the inquiry doesn't seem incomplete." In a section entitled "Tamasha

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Hundred Years, 27.

and Propaganda" the report makes a distinction between "entertainment-*tamashas*" and "propaganda-*tamashas*," adding that the latter garner attention because "at first glance they may seem entertaining, and because their artistic innovations attract spectators."[70] Despite the fact that the performances mounted by propaganda *pathaks* like the Lal Bawta are "undoubtedly far superior, from an artistic perspective," and regularly attended by thousands of people at high ticket prices, the report asserts that they cannot be cited as an example for other, entertainment-*tamashas* to follow. This is because, according to the report, the performers in such *kala pathaks* are not dependent upon *tamasha* for the sake of their livelihood; they mostly belong the class of industrial laborers who "turn to *tamasha* solely for the purposes of spreading party propaganda."[71] This is diagnosed as being wholly distinct from the enterprise of entertainment-*tamasha*, where performers lack resources, cater to changing public demands, and are thus not in a position to focus on raising the aesthetic quality of their art.

There certainly were significant differences in the business models, presentation formats and thematic content between the commercial *tamasha* troupes and the political *kala pathaks*;[72] however, the representation of the latter as an entirely separate entity – so much so that it even falls outside the scope of the Committee's comprehensive *tamasha* reform project – clearly stems from a deep anxiety about the ideological positioning and revolutionary aspirations of groups like the Lal Bawta. The report goes on to assert that "everyone is of the opinion that the commentary in these kinds of

[70] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," 13.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Madhukar Nerale, the proprietor of Hanuman Theatre, situated in Lalbaug within the former mill district, remarks: "Our theatre had nothing to do with any political movements – it was purely light entertainment for workers." Hanuman Theatre hosted many of "entertainment-*tamasha*" troupes, every evening, through the year. It is worth noting, however, that these performances catered to the same demographic as the *kala pathaks* – namely, the mill workers. Furthermore, these different kinds of artistic expressions flourished within the same cultural ecosystem – at least in Bombay – which was marked by a fluid exchange of ideas and styles. Adarkar and Menon, eds., *One Hundred Years*, 122.

propaganda *pathaks* is too inflammatory," characterizing this as a corruption of the standard *tamasha* format:

> *Tamasgirs* have always sought to expose the conflicts that arise because of the self-serving behavior of various sections of society. In fact, people come to watch their shows specifically for these incisive critiques [...] Characters like the tyrannical and capricious king, the cunning minister, the greedy monk, the conniving and greedy moneylender, crooks, misbehaving workers, etc. are regularly caricatured in *tamasha* skits. These are effective, but they do not cause any antagonism. There is no wish for any specific class to be completely eliminated because of their faults. The programs of the propagandist *pathaks* mentioned above have precisely this aim. For this reason, no matter how praiseworthy they might be from an artistic standpoint, they cannot be presented as worthy examples to professional *tamasha* artists.[73]

What clearly appear to be political objections to the radicalizing potential of the *kala pathaks* are thus recast here as problems of economics and aesthetics; indeed, one of the key contributions of these political *tamasha* groups in the 1940s and 50s was that they reimagined the form and function of *tamasha*, and Annabhau Sathe was pioneering figure in this regard. In lieu of the standard king-minister tropes, Annabhau introduced a new stock character of "Dhondya," a class-conscious protagonist who opposes and resists his class enemies, and whose "plain speech touches the hearts of workers and peasants. While entertaining them, Dhondya also teaches them how to live a life of self-respect."[74] These political *tamashas* entirely eliminated the devotional *gan*, the titillating *gavalan,* and erotic *lavanis* from its format*,* in a bid to "change the common perception that *tamasha* only revolves around the wanton display of female beauty."[75] It is particularly ironic, then, that these performances were targeted and banned under the guise of obscenity.

[73] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," 14.
[74] D.G. Gavankar, "Foreword," *Nave Tamashe* (Mumbai: Lok Sahitya, 1951).
[75] Milind Kasbe, *Tamasha: Kala Ani Kalavant* (Pune, Sugava Prakashan, 2007), 14.

The "new tamashas:" Loknatya

In response to the ban, Annabhau Sathe simply rebranded his art form; during a performance of *Majhi Mumbai* ("My Mumbai") in 1948 – a production that attracted the ire of the Congress authorities because it staged the struggle over Bombay between a Gujarati capitalist and a mill-worker – he prefaced the show with an announcement to the thousands of spectators in attendance: "The government has declared a ban on *tamasha*, so today we present before you a *loknatya* (lit: people's theater) entitled *Majhi Mumbai.*" Following this "historic act of renaming," which was met with tremendous applause, Lal Bawta continued its program, in the presence of the police force.[76] The government was compelled to change tack, and continued to issue bans on individual plays; however, this strategy also proved ineffective and crowds continued to flock to Annabhau's plays, despite threats of bans and arrests.

Although the neologism came into circulation as a symbol of irreverent defiance to state repression, the term *loknatya* acquired great purchase as an alternative designation for certain types of *tamasha*, and in some ways, this nomenclature outlived the rest of Annabhau's prodigious literary legacy within the popular cultural imagination.[77] Its enduring circulation owes to the fact that this neologism – which in literal terms is a conjunction of *lok,* meaning "the people, mankind, folks, the community or public" and *natya,* or "dancing, acting, gesturing, dramatic performance"[78] – is a versatile term that can be used to refer to any popular art form, though it is now, in the Marathi

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[76] Ibid., 15.

[77] Despite his extraordinary popularity, Annabhau's contributions to the literary and political Marathi landscape have been marginalized and underrepresented, even within communist circles, owing at least partly to the fact that he belonged to the Dalit *matang* caste and championed the need for caste-based mobilization, alongside class. See Veena Naregal, "*Lavani*, *Tamasha*, *Loknatya* and the Vicissitudes of Patronage," in *Marga: Ways of Liberation, Empowerment, and Social Change in Maharashtra*, eds. M. Naito, I Shima, and H. Kotani (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008), 329-356.

[78] J.T. Molesworth, *A Dictionary, Marathi and English, 2d ed., rev. and enl.* (Bombay: Bombay Education Society, 1857).

context, primarily associated with *tamasha*. In the original context of Annabhau's and other *kala pathak* performances, *loknatya* generally refers to a structured street play or to a form of people's theater.[79] Consequently, the term is also often used to describe any kind of *tamasha*-based performances that are intended for the express purpose of raising social awareness or for political propaganda.[80] However, the association of *loknatya* as a *political* form became increasingly more tenuous, especially by the second-half of the twentieth century. While the Marathi Encyclopedia translates *loknatya* into its most common anglicization, "folk drama," in other critical accounts, *loknatya* is described as the "urban, sophisticated" strain of *tamasha*, or simply as a synonym of *tamasha*.[81] As we may glean from the accounts presented in this chapter, the seeming depoliticization of this term is directly linked to the efforts by state authorities and the Marathi cultural elite to transform the status and legacy of *tamasha* through various reforms and legislations of the 1940s and 1950s, such the Reforms Committee, the Censor Board, etc. The simultaneous association of *loknatya* with the "urban" and the "folk" is a consequence of the widespread interest, among urban artists and audiences, in indigenous "folk" forms, especially from the 1960s onwards, and their concerted attempts to renew and preserve these forms by reinventing them for a modern, middle-class, urban audience. This is the brand of *loknatya* that G.P. Deshpande critiques in his pithy but incisive observations about the "new semantics" that had developed around *tamasha* in the wake of the "new politics of cultural nationalism" in the 1960s, remarking, "What was once a Tamasha became Sanskritized *lokanatya*."[82] Thus, while the term *loknatya* came into currency as a means of

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[79] Milind Awad, *The Life and Work of Annabhau Sathe: A Marxist-Ambedkarite Mosaic* (New Delhi: Gaur Publishers & Distributors, 2010).
[80] Vishwanath Shinde, *Paramparik Tamasha Ani Adhunik Vaganatya* (Pune: Pratima Prakashan, 1994).
[81] Tevia Abrams, *Tamasha: People's Theatre of Maharashtra State, India* (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1974); "Tamasha," *Marathi Vishwakosh*, ed. Lakshmanashastri Joshi, n.d., vishwakosh.marathi.gov.in/20004/.
[82] Sanskritization was a term introduced by sociologist M.N. Srinivas to explain the process caste-based social mobility, by which so-called lower castes emulate the rituals and practices of dominant castes, G.P. Deshpande, "History, Politics, and the Modern Playwright," *Theatre India* 1 (May 1999):

resistance against censorship measures that sought to reform and sanitize *tamasha,* by the 1960s, it also came to be used as a designation for these reformed, sanitized and "respectable" *tamashas* themselves.[83] One such reformed and reinvented *tamasha/loknatya* – Vasant Sabnis' landmark play *Viccha Majhi Puri Kara* (1965) – is the subject of the next chapter of this dissertation.

In many ways, the *loknatya* case may be read as a metonym for the overall network of relations in the context of *tamasha* regulation, where resistance is easily, and almost invariably, co-opted as yet another mechanism for repression and control. Another instructive instantiation of this pattern is the Tamasha Parishad, which was founded by Ahmedsheth Tambe (of Aryabhushan Theatre) and others to represent *tamasha* troupes, and had its first meeting in Pune in 1955.[84] Though it was intended as an advocacy group for artists, it also manifested, as Naregal describes it, "as part of the attempt to co-opt key *tamasha* 'bosses' into the regulatory agenda."[85] This kind of systemic co-option is a part and a product of the way in which *tamasha* was framed by hegemonic governmental and cultural forces from the late 1940s onwards, as a vitiated art form that needed uplift, but without taking into consideration the role of, or the impact upon, the artists in this equation. The Reforms Committee did recommend that there be special facilities created for *tamasha* training and instruction, and that "the government should provide active encouragement to *tamasha*."[86] However, to date no formal institutions exist for any kind of *tamasha* training, and while the government did start organizing *tamasha* festivals and competitions and instituting national awards to *tamasha* artists

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[83] For instance, an article written in 1996 observes that "After *tamasha* was renamed as 'loknatya', the same people who used to earlier turn up their noses at *tamasha*, or considered it to be lowly, now wink and watch it." J.V. Pawar, "Tamashapasun Loknatyaparyantachi Navi Malvat," *Loksatta,* 23 June 1996.

[84] Durga Dikshit, *Maharashtra Ka Lokdharmi Natya* (Jayapur: Panchsheel Prakashan, 1983), 98.

[85] Veena Naregal, "Performance, caste, aesthetics: The Marathi *sangeet natak* and the dynamics of cultural marginalisation," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 44, nos. 1-2 (2010): 86.

[86] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," 15.

from the 1950s, as Shailaja Paik points out, these efforts tend to patronize the art form while marginalizing the artists. The task of preserving and nurturing the art form is taken over by the "new high-cash/high-class artists"[87] and *tamasha*, as we shall see in the next chapter, is appropriated as a symbol of nativist cultural and regional pride. The state's mandated "active encouragement," thus, has resulted in "further stigmatiz[ing] Tamasgirs and also sustain[ing] their labor by consistently giving awards to them."[88] By all accounts, the introduction of censorial regulations did introduce a needed sense of order and systemization into the art of *tamasha*, but it did not translate into any long-term gains for the artists. Such exclusions are reflected in the operations of the Censor Board well into the 1960s; in 1964, when the Tamasha Parishad (which, as mentioned above, was not particularly representative nor principally adversarial to these regulatory mechanisms) petitioned to have their representatives on the Board, their proposition was rejected on the grounds that the recommended candidates (both professors) were not from the "literary field" and were more concerned with "the professional aspects of performance," which were beyond the purview of the Board. These representatives were thus deemed under-qualified to tackle the wide variety of materials handled by the Board, which, by the 1960s, had greatly expanded in scope and extended its jurisdiction far beyond *tamasha* performance.

VI. Living Legacies: The Stage Performance Scrutiny Board of Maharashtra

When it was first appointed 1953, the Tamasha Censor Board (or the Board for the Prior Scrutiny for Tamashas, Melas, and Ras) was approved for a three-year tenure from 1954 to 1957; this tenure was continuously extended on a periodic basis, and the Board is in operation even today,

[87] Deshpande, "History, Politics, and the Modern Playwright," 97.
[88] Shailaja Paik, "Mangala Bansode and the Social Life of Tamasha: Caste, Sexuality, and Discrimination in Modern Maharashtra," *Biography* 40, no. 1 (2017): 174.

though its scope has changed and broadened in the intervening years. In 1958, the Board extended the ambit of its scrutiny to include not just *tamashas*, "but also scripts of dramas, melas, loknatya and similar other varieties of public entertainment which involve the use of words."[89] Simultaneously, as the focus of the Board's activities expanded to become less *tamasha*-specific, so did the composition of its membership.[90] Dramatic literature rapidly became the prime focus of the Board's activities from the late-1950s onwards.[91] As the accelerating Samyukta Maharashtra Movement culminated in the formation of a separate state of Maharashtra in 1960, this office was renamed the "Stage Performances Scrutiny Board" (SPSB) of Maharashtra. In the initial phase of these transitions, the Board professed its commitment to being "liberal and helpful" in its enforcements, maintaining that its surveillance of folk literature was not intended to tamper with language or give it a "'civilised' or bourgeois flavour." It also sought to clarify that its judgements were made with "complete objectivity and without any bias, political or otherwise" and that "party propaganda as such is never disallowed."[92] It is worth wondering why such disclaimers and clarifications – which were published in the form of a short memo issued by the Directorate of Publicity in 1958 – were deemed necessary in the first place.

In any case, by the late 1960s and 1970s, the SPSB was perceived as anything but liberal and helpful. There were a string of sensational censorship cases in this period: most notably, Partap Sharma's play *A Touch of Brightness* was banned in 1965 for its depiction of prostitution in Bombay's

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[89] "Tamasha Board and Its Work," Directorate of Publicity. Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 2.

[90] In the earlier years of the Board, the members appointed were specialists in folk literatures, such as Y.N. Kelkar, G.L. Thokal (who was on the Reforms Committee), Apasaheb Inamdar (in group that went to meet Morarji), and Namdev Vhatkar. But by the mid-1960s and 1970s, towering literary figures in the fields of poetry and drama like Shanta Shelke and Kumud Mehta.

[91] Between 1955-1958, the Board had scrutinized 720 *tamasha* scripts, 720 *mela* scripts, and 1180 drama scripts.

[92] "Tamasha Board and Its Work," Directorate of Publicity. Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 3.

red-light district, and Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* was banned 1972 for its "bedroom scenes" and foul-mouthed and violent women. The Scrutiny Board's decisions in these cases were appealed in the Bombay High Court and ultimately overturned. Through these proceedings, the SPSB was heavily criticized as being orthodox, capricious and hostile, and following the *Sakharam* verdict, the Bombay High Court ordered the Scrutiny Board to be dissolved on the grounds that it had no internal mechanism for hearing or appeal on the Board's decisions.[93] While the SPSB was reconstituted a year later with an amended set of rules (which are still in effect today), the rhetoric of the anti-censorship demands that precipitated these changes is striking. Much like the anti-censor stance taken by Atre and others in the 1940s, the opposition to censorship in the 1970s was also framed in terms of the gulf between written words and live action in the realm of performance; however, since the focus had now shifted to scripted dramas rather than *tamasha*, the pivotal concern was not the loss of spontaneity, but the problem of "pre-censorship." As per this argument, since the Scrutiny Board censors scripts and not performances, all repressive measures and orders of the State are, purely considered, acts of pre-censorship and not censorship per se. On the basis of this notion, a group of theatre artists challenged the legitimacy of the Scrutiny Board's existence itself, initiating a legal battle is still ongoing in the Bombay courts.[94]

Many of these challenges levelled against the Scrutiny Board in recent years are often premised on the rhetorical stance that dramatic censorship is an antiquated colonial law, and that its

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[93] It is worth mentioning that two members of the Board, Dr. Sarojini Vaidya and Dr. Kumud Mehta were against banning the play. In fact, it was Mehta who recommended that the decision of the Board be appealed in court.

[94] When the reconstituted Scrutiny Board refused to grant a Certificate of Suitability to Mahesh Elkunchwar's play *Vasanakand* which deals with incest, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, two of India's leading playwrights, decided to challenge the Board's legitimacy, arguing "there is no need to underline the point that the creative realization of a play remains incomplete unless and until it is staged." Amol Palekar, a theater and film actor has led this charge, most recently filling a petition with the Bombay High Court in 2016. "Two Dramatists Plan to Fight Scrutiny Boards," *The Times of India,* 4 August, 1974.

repressive measures have their origins in the Dramatic Performances Act (DPA) imposed by the British in 1876. For instance, commenting on the saga surrounding his play *A Touch of Brightness,* Partap Sharma describes the SPSB as "a retrograde institution which helps neither the theatre nor the good people in it. Censorship in Maharashtra was instituted by the British to control expression, especially during the freedom movement. The same rules and regulations are being used today to foster inhibitions that have no place in contemporary society."[95] While it is true that the British introduced the basic idea and parameters of governmental control on performance, and that the DPA lives on in modified avatars in the post-independence period, the Scrutiny Board of Maharashtra is not merely an extension of colonial legislation; as we have seen in this chapter, it was borne of particular sociopolitical circumstances during the early years of the postcolonial regime. The *tamasha*-specific origins of the Scrutiny Board have gradually been elided from collective memory, especially from the 1960s-1970s onwards, when public attention was more squarely focused on drama related cases.[96] Consequently, the thrust of the Scrutiny Board's preservationist mission also diminished and changed. Up until 1962, the SPSB was still reiterating its commitment to and role in "preserving all that is best, healthy and creative in the art of *tamasha*."[97] However, as the focus of the Board increasingly shifted towards drama in the late 1960s-1970s, it seemed to prioritize tackling issues of obscenity on a case-by-case basis, and made few proclamations about the agenda of the Board as a whole.[98]

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[95] O.K. Joshee, "'Sakharam' Decision Set for Tuesday," *The Times of India,* 2 April 1972.
[96] In recent years, since 2009, the play *Sex, Morality and Censorship* has re-established this historical connection. This play is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
[97] "Letter no. Est. 162/2709," Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 2.
[98] Shanta Gokhale points out that the Scrutiny Board in the 1960s-1970s was more focused on legislating cases of obscenity than political content. See Phalguni Rao, "Censorship in Indian theatre," *Firstpost*, 1 April 2019, firstpost.com/living/censorship-in-indian-theatre-colonial-era-law-offended-mobs-clamp-down-on-thespians-freedom-of-expression-6360461.html. Needless to say, these lines were blurred, for in part the outcry against *A Touch of Brightness* was that it was anti-

Besides, by the 1970s, the onus of cultural censorship in Maharashtra was taken on by the Shiv Sena, a right-wing vigilante group who were fast gaining political power in Bombay. As the "unofficial censors," the Shiv Sena routinely declared plays as offensive, vandalized productions, or granted them unofficial permission for performance. These "street censors" began to yield as much, if not more, influence than the "state censors" in the 1970s, and their interventions were often more of a deterrent or an endorsement, to the stage life of a play.[99] The Shiv Sena declared themselves the self-appointed guardians of Marathi culture, and as they rose to power in the state, the popular cultural landscape of India had undergone radical transformations, especially with the liberalization of the economy in 1991, that opened the country up to Western imports in all arenas, from television channels to food products. The Board's jurisdiction expanded to include international music concerts, which were perceived as hotbeds of obscenity. The SPSB's judgements were now focused on "protecting Indian culture from the Western onslaught"[100] – which mostly manifested as embargoes on kissing, hugging or sexual behavior of any kind – leading them to be labelled the "culture police."

While the context and content of the Scrutiny Board had changed drastically in the 1990s, its actions were still premised on the basic idea that inappropriate sorts of performances could have a dangerous and corrupting influence on spectators, and on the moral fabric of society as a whole.

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national to depict the country in such a poor light at the international Commonwealth festival, especially when India in a state of war with Pakistan. See J. Anthony Lukas, "Playwright Stirs Furor in Bombay; His Realistic Drama Stirs Opposition of Officials," *The New York Times*, 5 December 1965, 174.

[99] In fact a crucial turning point in the *Sakharam Binder* debacle was when the cast invited the Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray to watch the play. The Sena had previously declared the play to be obscene and disrupted performances, but after watching the show, Thackeray declared there was nothing objectionable in the play and he "cleared" it. "'Sakharam' Bound Examination Hazards," *The Times of India,* 14 March 1973.

[100] This is how Shantaram Nandgaonkar, the chairman of the Scrutiny Board in 1988, explicated the role of the Board. See Smita Deshmukh, "Straight Answers: Shantaram Nandgaonkar," *The Times of India*, 10 January 2002, A1.

When the popular Australian pop band Savage Garden was due to perform in Bombay in 1998, the Maharashtra government and the Scrutiny Board expressed grave concern that such concerts would encourage young boys and girls to engage in inappropriate behaviors. They finally acceded to the concert, but the band had to submit all song lyrics in advance for approval; the Scrutiny Board also specified that "at best, the youths will be allowed to hold hands, but nothing beyond that will be allowed," and deployed police officers and four citizen observers to ensure that these rules were followed during the performance.[101] In a sense, the Scrutiny Board continued to conceive of its responsibility as preserving "all that is best, creative and healthy," however, the locus was no longer *tamasha*, but an abstract concept of "Indian culture." While the public morality was always the central problematic in how censorship was framed, in the 1940s, the task of the Board, at least in part, was to preserve and protect the performance form of *tamasha* from various corrupting social and cultural factors, ranging from illiteracy to communism; however now, in a reversal of the same schema, it was culture that had to be protected and preserved in the face of potentially damaging performances; in other words, performance preservation, of any kind, was no longer the primary or professed agenda of the Scrutiny Board.

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The de-prioritization of *tamasha* by Scrutiny Board coincided with the decline of *tamasha* performance in its erstwhile commercially vibrant centers, most crucially Bombay. The textile mills, which were in decline from the 1970s onwards, effectively shut down after the 1982 workers strike, rendering thousands of migrant workers – who were the core audience of these *tamashas* – unemployed and penniless. While numerous *tamasha* theaters had existed in the city in the 1940s,

[101] This policing attempt ultimately failed when the two hosts of the show, popular video jockeys and models Marc Robinson and Sophiya Haque, openly flouted the Scrutiny Board rules by kissing repeatedly on stage!

they rapidly started closing down or converting into cinema halls. By the 1980s, there was only one full-time *tamasha* theater in Bombay, the New Hanuman Theatre located in the heart of erstwhile Girangaon, but after years of struggle and despite the best efforts of its owner Madhukar Nerale, in 1994 this theater was also forced to close its shutters and convert into a marriage hall. The large *maidans* or open grounds where *tamasha* would be performed were no longer open to *tamasha* performers, and the government also instituted an 11:30 pm deadline for loudspeakers in open-air theaters and auditoria, a major blow for *tamashas* that usually ran through the night. The political *loknatyas* also lost patronage as the younger crop of politicians entering into the political arena from the 1980s onwards were not interested in using *tamasha* for political propaganda, making it harder for *shahirs* and their troupes to find any avenues of employment. For all its talk of Marathi culture, the Shiv Sena did little to bolster or support *tamasha* artists when they assumed political power in the state. In any case, from the 1960s, *tamasha* was repurposed to satisfy the yen for "roots" among theater practitioners, and among the emerging urban Marathi middle classes nostalgic for an idealized and abstracted idea of ruralness.[102] The new mode of preservation of *tamasha*, thus, was not through censorial intervention, but by reinventing the form to cater to the urban, educated, white-collar middle classes, who now constituted the target audience, and increasingly, also the performers. Naturally, this shift necessitated a structural reimagining of the nature and purpose of the *tamasha* form; it is this process of transformation, and this new modality of performance preservation, that we turn to in the next chapter.

[102] G.P. Deshpande, "Europe and Our Theatre," *Dialectics of Defeat: The Problems of Culture in Postcolonial India* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2006), 93.

CHAPTER TWO

Redirected Desires: Sanitization, Reform and the Revitalization of *Tamasha*

There is no easy way to avoid the identity politics that arise when one group or culture appropriates another group or culture's art form and when members of the "indigenous" culture and the appropriating culture, as well as critics from both cultures articulate conservationist or pluralistic arguments.

- E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*[1]

I'm like y'all, this is not a curry...I've never made a curry, I don't come from a culture that knows about curry…I come from no culture. I have no culture.

- Alison Roman[2]

One of the most sensational cases of "cultural appropriation" in recent public memory was the saga surrounding celebrity chef Alison Roman's #TheStew. The controversy bubbled to the surface when this white chef's New York Times column carried a quick-fix recipe for a coconut milk, chickpea and turmeric infused "stew." The recipe, like many of Roman's others, quickly went viral, but then came the backlash. The stew seemed to be a breezy mashup of various vaguely "ethnic" cuisines – South Indian, Jamaican, Japanese – though none of these sources of inspiration were overtly acknowledged. Roman's critics raised two main objections: one centered on the hegemonic marginalization of chefs of color, who could claim some cultural ties to these ingredients.

[1] E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 206.
[2] Megan Reynolds, "Alison Roman Is More Than #TheStew," *Jezebel*, 22 October 2019, jezebel.com/alison-roman-is-more-than-thestew-1838861751.

As one article contends, "the question [is] whether, say, a person of color could have also made a stew featuring chickpeas and turmeric go viral. Aren't both the perceived novelty and the recipe's virality tied to the whiteness of its creator?" The other issue was about the labelling of the dish as a "stew," a "generic, rootless – and yet definitive – name" that obscures all cultural influences; the recipe, some critics assert, could be more accurately described as a curry.[3] The rub here is that "curry" is as generic and rootless a designation, albeit perhaps more tonally "authentic." This nomenclatural charge was ultimately met with a nomenclatural defense, as the epigraph above attests. In addition, an offhand disclaimer now prefaces the recipe on the New York Times website.

I begin with this vignette because it shores up incongruities that often get elided in adjudications on cultural appropriation. Although the unsaid, but prevailing consensus in the Roman saga was that the recipe itself was quite good – accessible, robust and wholesome – questions of quality were considered irrelevant, or at best incidental, to debates about the ethical stakes of Roman's culinary (con)fusion. How does one recognize the manifestly shifty cultural politics of appropriative gestures while also acknowledging the very real pleasures they can afford on a visceral register? Or indeed, acknowledge these visceral pleasures as being fundamental, rather than incidental, to processes of appropriation? In this chapter, I take up the subject of *tamasha* appropriation through a reading of Vasant Sabnis' *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* ("Fulfil My Desires," 1965), a play that actively advocates for, participates in, and in some ways pioneers, the sanitization of *tamasha*. This hugely successful, and widely translated and adapted popular comedy is commonly celebrated as the first largescale experiment in modifying *tamasha* into a "respectable" form, suited for educated, white-collar, middle-class audiences. This sanitization process, I demonstrate, is a complex one, that is premised on the mobilization of seemingly disparate discourses of reform,

[3] Navneet Alang, "Stewed Awakening," *Eater*, 20 May 2020, eater.com/2020/5/20/21262304/global-pantry-alison-roman-bon-appetit.

regionalism, and modernity, and the simultaneous, conspicuous elision of caste. Sanitization is posited here as a preservatory endeavor, intended to safeguard subaltern performance cultures, which as E. Patrick Johnson observes in the epigraph quoted above, mobilizes specific kinds of "identity politics." *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara's* interventions within and around the performance of *tamasha* lay the ground for a new mode of "hegemonic appropriation" of this minoritarian art form.

The preservation of *tamasha* emerged as an urgent public concern from the late-1940s onwards, capturing the imagination of state officials, intellectuals, and artists alike. As discussed in Chapter 1, this preoccupation with preservation was, paradoxically, bolstered by the various regimes of censorship that were instituted during this period. Censorship, we have seen, was upheld as a preservatory force, one that had the capacity to save *tamasha* from degradation and decay, primarily by sanitizing it of any unwanted, corrupting influences. This issue of sanitization has emerged as a critical line of inquiry in recent scholarship on the subject of *tamasha* and the associated form of *lavani*. Sharmila Rege's foundational work on the "hegemonic appropriation" and popular status of these performance forms, Veena Naregal's astute analysis of the relationship between caste, patronage and historiography, and Shailaja Paik's ethnographic account of the gendered and casteized "social life" of *tamasha*, all draw attention to the myriad ways in which the ruling elite and the state government in Maharashtra have sought to sanitize *tamasha* and *lavani*: by labelling the art as vulgar, and seeking redress through censorship and reform; by patronizing the form, but side-lining the artists; and by repurposing *tamasha,* historically performed by so-called "untouchable" and "lower-caste" artists, to serve as a signifier of elite Maharashtrian cultural pride.[4]

[4] See Sharmila Rege, "The Hegemonic Appropriation of Sexuality: The case of the *lavani* performers of Maharashtra," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 29, no. 1-2 (1995): 23-38; Veena Naregal, "Marginality, Regional Forms and State Patronage," *Seminar India* 588 (2008): 33-39; Shailaja Paik, "Mangala Bansode and the Social Life of *Tamasha*: Caste, Sexuality, and Discrimination in Modern Maharashtra," *Biography* 40, no. 1 (2017): 170-198.

This chapter engages *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* as both text and context; that is, as a paradigmatic example of such appropriative gestures, and also as symptomatic of the larger sociopolitical and cultural circumstances within which these reformatory projects are activated. The ever-familiar problems attendant to the study of ephemeral performance phenomena are exacerbated in the study of this particular object, for *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara's* enduring popularity owed much to its reputation for constant novelty, where each performance held the promise of improvised, topical content. It is because of this quality that this play continues to occupy its peculiar status as a landmark cultural event that has received scant critical attention; for while this play attracted a vast viewership over several years, and, I suggest, had a profound influence on the production and perception of "folk" forms like *tamasha*, it did not generate extensive material traces. There is a published script in existence, but it is intentionally incomplete, and by the playwright's own admission, is not an adequate representation of the play in performance.[5] This chapter attempts to engage these disparities productively, attending to the ways in which the incommensurability of the written text and the volatility of the live performance are harnessed in service of the play's sanitizing mission. The reform of *tamasha*, as we shall see, is posited in and through the play as being an always unfinished project that demands constant vigilance; at the same time, the play itself was received as complete, consummate example of a reformed *tamasha*.

Since this chapter attempts to take a long view of the play under discussion, the analysis that follows is divided into three main sections. The first is focused primarily on the text of *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* and its iterations in performance, examining how theatrical and meta-theatrical devices are employed in service of the play's reformist vision. The second section maps out the various contexts

[5] "Introduction: Vichchha Majhi Puri Kara," *NCPA Facts and News* (1987), 22. The printed play text omits the *gavalan* that was usually performed as part of the play because it was not authored by Sabnis.

– environmental, regional, cultural, sociopolitical – of the play's production and reception. The third section engages with the question of genre and traces the play's afterlife and impact through its adaptations and translations.

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On 21st December 1965, a play titled *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* premiered at Rang Bhavan, an open-air theatre in Mumbai, India. Replete with songs, dancing, innuendo and repartee, this Marathi-language comedy became an instant hit, with a run of more than 2500 shows of its original production in the two decades that followed. According to one estimate, by 1973, about one million people had watched the play.[6] It has since been revived, translated and adapted several times, and continues to be performed today. The play's enduring popularity and critical acclaim rests upon what has been perceived as its pioneering innovation: its ingenious incorporation of *tamasha,* the popular but largely denigrated local "folk" form, within its dramaturgical frame.

The play that eventually became *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* was devised through a prolonged collaboration between two artists: Vasant Sabnis and Dada Kondke. Sabnis was a prolific humorist, whose writing spanned various genres, including short stories, articles, and skits (or *vags*), that constitute the main narrative portion of a *tamasha*. In the 1960s, he published a *vag* entitled *Chhapri Palangacha Vag* ("The skit of the Four-Poster Bed") in *Veena*, a Marathi literary magazine. It was then taken up for performance by Dada Kondke, an itinerant actor formerly associated with the cultural wing of the nationalist-socialist organization, the Rashtra Seva Dal.[7] Kondke had recently founded

[6] Tevia Abrams, *Tamasha: People's Theatre of Maharashtra State, India* (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1974), 120.

[7] The Rashtra Seva Dal was established in 1923 as a social organisation affiliated with the Indian National Congress. In 1948, it officially disaffiliated from the Congress and continued its mandate to propagate socialist ideals, particularly among youth populations. In Maharashtra, the Rashtra Seva Dal established a cultural squad or *kala pathak* which staged plays, *tamashas*, etc. Several leading literary and artistic personalities were associated with the squad, including P.L. Deshpande, Vasant

his own his own travelling theatre troupe and wanted to perform the skit at various religious festivals and cultural programs. The skit failed to attract audiences and after five disastrous performances, Kondke resolved to shelve the project; however, Sabnis offered to revise the script, turning it into a "full-fledged *tamasha* for the stage" by adding a *batavani* that prefaced the *vag*, and functioned as a punchy meta-commentary on the form of the *tamasha*.[8] This new and improved performance text included all the standard elements of a conventional *tamasha*, including a g*an* (invocation), a *gavalan* (a flirtatious, musical exchange featuring Krishna and milkmaids); *batavani* (commentary); a *vag* (skit) and *lavani* performances*;* as expected, the *vag* was the longest and most conventionally "dramatic" aspect, with a fabulistic plot about a constable who wants to become an inspector, and conspires with his lover, the dancer Mainavati, to con the current inspector into stealing the King's bed and getting arrested for the crime. When the play was re-presented in this new avatar (now titled *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara*), however, it was the *batavani*, enacted by Sabnis and Kondke, that garnered the most accolades, and catapulted the play into national prominence.

I. Meta-commentary, Performativity and Representational Surplus: The Device of the *Batavani*

The Performance of Reform

The *batavani* usually functions as a prologue to the skit or *vag;* however, it is not usually thematically related to the *vag*. Unlike the *vag*, the *batavani* does not have a plot, but is an improvised riff on one or more topics, involving extensive wordplay, innuendo, double-entendre and satire. The gist of its overall tone and style may be gleaned from the fact that the alternative term sometimes

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Bapat, V.D Madgulkar, Nilu Phule, and of course, Dada Kondke.

[8] Mukta Rajadhyaksha, "Man of Comedy," *The Times of India*, 11 April 1993, 14.

used for *batavani* is "*farsa,*" derived from the English word farce.[9] Although there is some scholarly disagreement about this stylistic and etymological provenance, there is a general consensus that the essence of the *batavani* is that it is spontaneous and improvisatory.[10] It is usually structured as a dialogue between two stock characters, *Tatya* and *Bapu* (both are colloquial forms of address for older men). In Sabnis' play too, the *batavani* begins formulaically as a conversation between these stock characters, who profess to be itching for "a new kind of *vag* for a new generation."[11] Fittingly, after just a few lines of preamble, these two characters exit and are replaced by a pair of "new kind" of narrators: a Shahir (a balladeer/poet conventionally associated with *tamasha*) and a Lekhak, or playwright, who then present the *batavani* to the audience.

The impetus for the *batavani*, Sabnis claims, emerged from his desire to "say something on the subject of *tamasha* [...] I had the broad idea that a *shahir* and a *lekhak* run into each other on the street, and the subject of *tamasha* comes up, prompting a debate between them about what *tamasha* should be like, what it shouldn't be like..."[12] Sabnis' dramatization of this debate, as I illustrate below, is rather ingenious. The debate itself, however, has a longer history, for discussions on "what *tamasha* should be like and shouldn't be like" had been raging in Marathi literary and political circles since the 1940s. Following the ban on *tamasha* imposed by the Bombay Province, a "Tamasha Sudharana Committee" or Committee on *Tamasha* Reforms was constituted in 1948, with a two-fold mandate:

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[9] Vishwanath Shinde, *Paramparika Tamasha Ani Adhunik Vaganatya* (Pune: Pratima Prakashan, 1994), 16.
[10] Rustum Achalkhamb categorically insists that there is no historical or stylistic link between the *batavani* and *farsa*, since the latter is a form that became popular on Marathi stages only from the late 1950s onwards, and unlike the *batavani*, it is scripted, and imported from the Western style farces. See Rustum Achalkhamb, *Tamasha Lokrangbhumi* (Pune: Sugava Prakashan, 2006), 139.
[11] Vasant Sabnis, *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* (Pune: Continenta; Prakashan, 1968), 1.
[12] Vasant Sabnis, "Yashala Ganit Nahi," Vasant Sabnis File, National Centre for Performing Arts Reference Library, Mumbai.

(a) To conduct an inquiry into the undesirable elements that have entered *tamasha*, and
(b) To make recommendations to the government about how *tamasha* can be reformed in order to make it a wholesome form of entertainment.[13]

The legacy of this Committee, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, is a complicated one; while its official recommendations exhorted the government to promote *tamasha* and make provisions for *tamasha* training and education, it also introduced directives that imposed new kinds of state control on *tamasha* performance. Every *tamasha* troupe would now have to be registered with the government and acquire a license, and there were severe restrictions placed on existing strategies of advertisement and remuneration.[14] Most significantly, the Committee facilitated the establishment of the Tamasha Censor Board in 1954, which mandated that all scripts and lyrics had to be approved prior to performance. In sum, the report of the Committee, and the consequent institutionalization of censorship legitimized a new kind of remedial discourse around *tamasha* centered on rhetoric of *sudharana* or reform, which posited "obscenity" as an ill-defined but ever present threat.[15] While some of the above injunctions were challenged by artists and activists from different quarters, by the 1960s, the Maharashtra State Government had implemented a number of schemes to incentivize the kinds of *tamasha* that were deemed to be politically and morally desirable.[16]

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[13] "Tamasha Sudharana Kamiticha Ahwal," Stage Performance Scrutiny Board Records, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, 1948.
[14] As per the official recommendations of the report, *tamasha* artists were no longer allowed to sit outside their tents to advertise their performances; each *tamasha* troupe would now have to acquire licenses from the government; and during the *daulat jadda* (the practice of offering money to bid for *lavanis*), any bodily contact with the dancer had to be avoided.
[15] We have seen in Chapter 1, how the "obscene" in *tamasha* reform discourse was opaque and variable. The precise referent of obscenity was never quite clear: in some instances, *tamasha* is labelled obscene because it outraged religious Hindu sentiments; in other cases because it had suggestive lyrics and gestures. The "obscene" was also differentiated from the "vulgar," which connoted the "rural." Upon closer inspection, it would also appear that obscenity was just a ruse and that the real target of this discourse was seditious content. Such obfuscations around the category of the obscene, of course, have a longer history, dating back to the colonial period.
[16] "Tamasha," *Marathi Vishwakosh*, ed. Lakshmanashastri Joshi, n.d.,

Sabnis' investment in *tamasha* seems to derive from the same impulse that animated these governmental mandates, namely, to sanitize *tamasha* of its supposedly undesirable elements. In the preface to the printed text of *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* Sabnis writes:

> Folk art [*lok kala*] is a very powerful form; but over the course of time, it has become neglected. It has to change with the times, without losing its essence. Since that has not happened, this form has declined. This form will achieve popularity again only by eliminating the undesirable and vulgar elements that have entered this form, and by situating it within a modern context. Based on this conviction, I have written a few plays.[17]

It is in the *batavani* that Sabnis provides a clear, and highly entertaining, account of how this sanitization of *tamasha* may be accomplished. The two narrators, the Shahir and the Lekhak, belong to different worlds, as their appellations indicate: the former is associated with popular, oral performance and the latter with literary, written texts. But as the *batavani* begins, their worlds literally collide when they run into each other, and through a sequence of facetious punning, they discover significant overlaps between their vocations. In this same bantering spirit, the two narrators then initiate a dialogic inquiry into the nature of *tamasha,* specifically on the issue of *vinod* and *shringar* – that is, the comedic and the erotic, respectively – and their rightful place within this form. The Lekhak begins by acknowledging that comedy and eroticism are the essence of *tamasha,* an idea that comes up repeatedly in scholarly and anecdotal discussions of this art form. This is hardly surprising, since much of the moral panic around "obscenity" in *tamasha* ultimately converges around the issue of bawdy jokes and sensual dancing. It is worth noting that while the terms used above – *vinod* and *shringar* – are simply Marathi words for comedy and eroticism respectively, they are also used to

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vishwakosh.marathi.gov.in/20004, 164, and Sharmila Rege, "The Hegemonic Appropriation of Sexuality: The case of the lavani performers of Maharashtra," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 29, no. 1-2 (1995): 35.

[17] Vasant Sabnis, *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* (Pune: Continenta; Prakashan, 1968), n.p.

designate literary moods or tropes.[18] Most critiques of eroticism in the context of *tamasha*, like this one, attempt to differentiate the erotic (or *shringar*), an aesthetic category, from the obscene (or *ashleel*), a moral concern.

In this vein, the Lekhak, while celebrating the place of *vinod* and *shringar* in *tamasha*, cautions the Shahir against vulgarity and obscenity, delineating these distinctions through the elaborate metaphor of a desirable woman. He first poetically evokes the image of a prototypically beautiful woman – with a graceful, delicate body, majestic face, golden complexion and deep eyes – and asks the Shahir to conjure her up in his imagination. He then uses the standard *batavani* trope of inversion, employing similar poetic conceits to imbue the woman with diametrically opposite characteristics:

> Lekhak: Shahir, behold this woman before your eyes –
>
> Shahir: Held –
>
> Lekhak: Shahir, now if you invert the woman's form –
>
> Shahir: Invert…the woman is the same, right?
>
> Lekhak: Yes, the woman is the same…
>
> Shahir: Ok then do what you like…
>
> Lekhak: Shahir, how do you invert her form? (*Recites*) "From her nose, the dangling of snot…"[19]

Interspersed with the Shahir's protestations and wisecracks, the Lekhak composes an entire poetic verse describing this "inverted" beauty, complete with dangling snot, lice-infested hair, dirt-ringed neck, wax-stuffed ears, bearing an overall shabby countenance and reeking of sweat. The

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[18] *Shringar*, in particular, is one of the eight *rasas* or essences codified in classical Sanskrit aesthetic ("*Rasa*") theory. See Bharata Muni, *Natyasastra*, trans. Adya Rangacharya (Bangalore: IBH Prakashan, 1986).

[19] A crucial aspect of the pun that is lost in translation here is that in Marathi the same word, "roop" can be used to mean "form" or "beauty." Sabnis, *Viccha*, 11.

Shahir, who has been fruitlessly waiting for a real-life woman to materialize on stage, is duly aghast at this description, and objects to this sophistry. The Lekhak retorts:

> Lekhak: Shahir, I have not done anything. The woman is the very same – but if you disrupt her form, disfigure her body, dismember her appearance – then the same woman seems repulsive and you want to turn your face away […] Shahir, it is the same with *shringar*. If *shringar* becomes disproportionate, or its rhythm is disrupted, and structure dismembered, then it seems similarly repulsive, and you want to turn your face away.[20]

Just as a woman is only appealing when she is "proper" in appearance and countenance, so too, *vinod* and *shringar* are only appealing when they are presented with propriety. This inverted woman joke became one of the most popular excerpts of the play, eventually assuming an adage-like quality.[21] The above scene also illustrates one of the multiple ways in which anxieties about obscenity and morality, in the *tamasha* context, are invariably, and unsurprisingly, staked upon the figure of the woman – even if the woman in question is purely imaginary, or even, as we shall see in the next chapter, completely absent. While the *tamasha* woman is the subject of an entire chapter in this dissertation (Chapter 4), it is worth delving into some detail here, because this device of the inverted woman encapsulates some of the inherent difficulties of performing reform, as this play attempts to do.

The rhetorical equation of a woman with an essentially pure but provisionally imperiled abstraction is a familiar discursive trope, routinely evoked in descriptions of nature, nation, tradition, art and so on.[22] However, what is intriguing about the above formulation is that here, the

[20] Sabnis, *Viccha,* 13.
[21] As discussed in Chapter 4, Dr. Mina Nerurkar, who attained great celebrity for devising and performing a *lavani* show in the United States of America in 1993, cites the inverted woman metaphor as a primer on how to metaphorically distinguish between good and bad *lavanis*. "Aara Gadya, Haus Nahi Fitli," *Maharashtra Times,* 3 Jan 2004. Several other periodical features on *Viccha* written in later years include claims to the effect that these verses have become household references.
[22] For instance, in "The Nation and its Women," Partha Chatterjee demonstrates the ways in which anti-imperialist discourse in India was predicated on an equation between 'woman' and 'tradition',

"undesirable and vulgar" ("*anishta ani ashishta")* elements that Sabnis wishes to purge from *tamasha* are conjured through the metaphor of a woman who is undesirable (and even positively repulsive) because she is physically disgusting. The notion of the vulgar – which in the context of *tamasha* almost always connotes sexual licentiousness – is thus recast here as desexualized, corporeal grotesqueness. What do we make of this transposition?

Aesthetic representations of the grotesque can be, and are, effectively mobilized as a short-hand for inauthenticity, falsehood and immorality, as many theorizations on the subject attest.[23] Furthermore, in the Indian aesthetic and sociocultural context, the evocation of the repulsive as corporeal grotesqueness is invariably imbricated in a caste-based purity/pollution logic; wherein the repulsive force becomes phenomenologically associated with untouchability, and aesthetic disgust becomes equated with moral disgust.[24] Undoubtedly, these associations are at work in the inverted woman trope as well. At the same time, the sublimation of the sexual into the grotesque in this context, I suggest, is also indicative of a more fundamental problem entailed in the kind of sanitizing revisionism that *Viccha* aims to undertake. Sabnis' intervention into *tamasha* was an attempt to save the form from itself, so to speak; the revitalization of this supposedly vitiated art form, Sabnis

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and ultimately 'nation.' There is no dearth of examples that equate women to some form of art, and just one potent example may be found in the poems of Baudelaire where women are routinely compared to Poetry. See Chatterjee, "The Nation and its Women," in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[23] In accounting for the "special aesthetic savouring of disgust," Arindam Chakrabarti points out that a repulsive image may be productively mobilized as a short-hand for the inauthentic, for, "metaphysically, the cliched equation of beauty and truth tempts us to equate the ugly with the false." See Arindam Chakrabarti, "Refining the Repulsive: Toward an Indian Aesthetics of the Ugly and the Disgusting," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Arindam Chakrabarti (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 150. The affective response of disgust also almost invariably carries a moral charge; as William Miller contends in his authoritative monograph on the subject, "moral judgment seems almost to demand the idiom of disgust." See *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), xi.

[24] Gopal Guru, "Aesthetic of Touch and the Skin: An Essay in Contemporary Indian Political Phenomenology," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Arindam Chakrabarti (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 297-315.

indicates, hinges on the elimination any traces of the obscenity that have become endemic to it. However, the constitutive paradox of such censorial gestures, as Lotte Hoek notes, is that in order "to ascertain what is obscene, a socially inappropriate and 'coarse' depiction of sexuality must be brought to public attention so that it can be disavowed…"[25] In other words, how does one suppress the obscene without at least nominally exposing that which is to be suppressed? Sabnis appears to circumvent this representational conundrum by recasting the obscene in terms of the grotesque; the associative language of metaphor allows him to allude to the "undesirable elements" without explicitly conjuring up the very thing he wishes to excise.

The hazard, or perhaps the true appeal, of this strategy, however, is that the affective response of disgust itself almost invariably carries a latent erotic charge.[26] Indeed, the language used to describe the handling of the woman in Sabnis' *batavani* suggests sexual pursuit, even if the description itself seems to eschew it, as suggested in the Shahir's proffer for the Lekhak to "do what [he] want[s]" with the imaginary woman, or his grouse that the Lekhak has "completely disheveled" the lady he had been fantasizing about, or in the very gesture of two men figuratively "inverting" a woman.

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[25] Lotte Hoek, *Cut-pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3.

[26] From the 11th century Sanskrit poet Kshamendra's literary experiments demonstrating "the intertwining of eros and disgust," to Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic accounts of abjection as a "vortex of summons and repulsion," to Sianne Ngai's epilogic inquiry into the co-imbrication of disgust and desire, critical treatises on the subject of aesthetic revulsion compel us to ask if it is at all possible to have encounter with the disgusting that does not carry some kind of latent erotic charge. See Chakrabarti, "Refining," 158; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). Concurrently, one might also question if there is any representation of the feminine body in any context that isn't always already eroticized; Peggy Phelan's inquiry into the "politics of visibility" interrogates this idea, particularly in her reading of Cindy Sherman's subversive strategies of self-portraiture. See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

The *batavani*'s reformist strategy is to pre-emptively draw attention to the various modes in which improper eroticism *could* be evoked; its censorial power, thus, is exerted through its "staging of an opposition between corrupting and purifying forces and agencies," but where the corrupting force is coded in allusion and implication.[27] This point may be underscored through yet another example. As we have seen, Lekhak – and by extension, Sabnis himself – advocates for a reformed *tamasha* that is less profane. Much of this advocacy is delivered in a highly sardonic register, and the Shahir's spirited wisecracks mitigate the didactic import of the Lekhak's injunctions. Towards the end of the *batavani,* he offers to write a suitably tasteful script for the Shahir to perform, on the condition that he not introduce any bawdy "*holi* scenes."[28] Just like the inverted woman, the "holi scene" here functions as a shorthand for the improper erotic that is repeatedly insinuated but not fully instantiated:

> Lekhak: It is precisely this kind distasteful chatter that has given *tamasha* a bad name. If you want more people to watch *tamasha* and want your business to prosper, then you have to eliminate these *holi* scenes…
>
> Shahir: Now look here…*holi* should be eliminated…*tamasha* should be reformed…everyone says the same thing, and it is even written in the newspapers…but who will tell us what precisely must be done? Will you?[29]

Taken as a whole, the *batavani* is an answer to the Shahir's lament. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the subject of *tamasha* reform from the 1950s onwards was vociferously championed in governmental policies, magazine articles, intellectual debates, and so on. But *Viccha* posited a model

[27] Richard Burt, *The Administration of Aesethetics: Censorship, Political Criticism, and the Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xviii.
[28] Holi is a spring festival. Its celebration involves throwing of coloured water and powders, and ostensibly barriers of caste, class and gender do not apply in this exchange. On account of this free-for-all spirit, it has come to be equated with displays of vulgarity and obscenity, and this the context in which the Lekhak invokes it. It is worth noting that historically, it is the lower-castes and women who have generally been accused of debasing this festival and heightening its immorality and indecency. See Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).
[29] Sabnis, *Viccha,* 14-15.

of how such censorship and reform could be instituted in *practice*, by offering practical directives for the uplift of *tamasha*. While these prescriptions are enshrined within a frame that is ostensibly farcical – namely the *batavani* – their solemnity may be gleaned from the fact that the play consistently seeks to fulfil its own promise; it not only prescribes a formula for a more sanitized *tamasha*, but actively seeks to realize it. It is performative, operating as a speech-act in which "to say something is to do something," insofar as it consistently positions itself as an instantiation of the very thing it advocates.[30] Through this introductory banter, we are not only invited to experience the new, sophisticated version of *tamasha*, but also to witness the process by which this sanitization occurs, and the perils and possibilities it furnishes. It serves as an exemplification of the fact that censorship, whether it manifests as redaction, reform or revitalization, "not only legitimates discourses by allowing them to circulate, but is itself part of a performance, a simulation in which censorship can function as a trope to be put on show."[31]

Between the Real and the Representational

Originally, the *batavani* was only supposed to be performed in the first few shows of *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara,* to convey the play's novel thematic and stylistic interventions and express the playwright's own position on them; but it turned out to be such a crowd-pleaser that the *batavani* became an integral and permanent part of the play.[32] Much of *Viccha's* tremendous popular appeal and transformative potential, it would seem, rested upon the purposive overlap between the real and the representational, or what Andrew Sofer, in his essay on "conjuring performatives" in *Dr. Faustus,*

[30] J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975), 12.
[31] Burt, *Administration of Aesethetics*, xviii.
[32] Vasant Sabnis, "Amhi ani Prekshak," *Rangbhumi* 1 (April 1968): 27.

describes as the blurring of the distinction between *mimesis* (representing) and *kinesis* (doing).[33] In fact, the parallels I draw above between the character of the playwright (i.e. the Lekhak) and the actual playwright (Sabnis himself) are not merely rhetorical, but are based on the remarkable similarities between the narrative of the *batavani* and actual circumstances surrounding the production of this play. For one, Sabnis' preface to the printed text concludes with this caveat that clearly echoes the Lekhak's dialogue:

> A final note: If anyone other than Dada Kondke and Party attempt to produce this play, then they must assume the responsibility and commitment to ensure that the essential message of the play is not misrepresented, and *that absolutely no kind of vulgarity is allowed to infiltrate into its dramatic representation*.[34]

Sabnis even exceeded the fictional character in his almost puritanical zeal for propriety, especially because his real-life collaborator, Dada Kondke, was somewhat less tractable than his fictional counterpart, the Shahir. In fact, Kondke went on to achieve phenomenal popularity as a film actor, primarily on account of his flair for improvised satire and ribald double entendre. His performances were littered with topical references to current affairs, and if any eminent personalities or local celebrities happened to be in the audience, Kondke would throw in a few one-liners at their expense.[35] One spectator who watched several shows of *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* recalls that Kondke

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[33] Andrew Sofer, "How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in 'Doctor Faustus'," *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 1 (2009): 1-21.

[34] Sabnis, *Viccha,* n.p.; emphasis added.

[35] For instance, in one show in Delhi, the eminent theatre personality Ebrahim Alkazi was in the audience. The extreme nervousness that the actors and Sabnis felt at this theatre doyen's presence was further augmented by Alkazi's grim and sophisticated countenance. Kondke recalls that they had been cautioned by the organizers of the show not to take any kind of licenses with their dialogue, and to exercise some restraint. The *batavani* had been shortened. Everything had to be of a high standard to cater to the Delhi audience. As soon as the *gavalan* began, however, Kondke could not resist taking a dig at Alkazi, shaming his fellow actor for never having heard of him, saying: "Don't you want to work in theatre? How can you not know who Alkazi is?" Alkazi was apparently so tickled by this joke that he started guffawing loudly and all the tension in the atmosphere melted away. See Vasant Bhalekar, *Superhiṭ Dada* (Thane: Anagha Prakashan, 2006), 54.

usually cracked a couple of obscene jokes at every performance.[36] These occasions, he surmises, "must have caused the educated ladies in the audience some embarrassment," which, incidentally, is exactly how Sabnis phrases his own objections to commercial *tamashas*.[37] The spectator goes on to describe an incident during a show at the Shivaji Mandir auditorium in Pune, Maharashtra, where he was watching from the wings:

> In that show, Dada [Kondke] cracked a mildly obscene joke and the entire theatre erupted! Sabnis*sahib* immediately got up and went into the make-up room… the agitation on his face was evident. After a while Dada came into the make-up room and *sahib* got so angry with him that Dada could not utter a single word. Dada pleadingly said "I made a mistake, it won't happen again," touched Sabnis' feet and hurried on stage because it was time for his entry.[38]

At the end of this show, Sabnis appeared on the stage, Lekhak-like, and publicly chastised Kondke, threatening to quit the production if Kondke ever cracked an obscene joke again. While it is unclear whether this episode had any lasting consequences, it is worth noting that even such seemingly infelicitous performances of representational excess had the same perlocutionary effect: they posited *Viccha* as a fertile site for the ongoing moral improvement of popular entertainment.

Sabnis was not the first playwright to integrate *tamasha* into his dramaturgy, nor did he, by any means, invent the rhetoric of *tamasha* reform; to some extent, the meta-theatrical register of the *batavani* is also something of a standard *tamasha* trope, for the opening lines of the printed play ("Bapurao, the *gan* is over, the *gavalan* is over, what's next?") reads like a formulaic segue into narratorial banter. However, what is extraordinary about the meta-commentary enacted in the *batavani* is not its premise, but the truth-effects it seemed to create. On account of its elaborate self-reflexivity, the play seemed to stipulate the terms of the discourse within which its contribution was

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[36] A significant anecdotal detail here is that Sabnis only acted in the *batavani* in shows that were in Mumbai and Pune, and could not travel for shows anywhere else due to the constraints of his day job in the state government.

[37] Sabnis, "Amhi ani Prekshak," 27.

[38] N.S. Vaidya, "15 October Rozi Pahila Smrutidin," *Maharashtra Times*, 12 October 2003.

to be evaluated. This is reflected in several reviews of the play, which set out to offer a critical assessment of the play's contributions, but mostly end up reproducing the play's representation of itself. Consider, for instance, the following review published in 1966 in the Marathi periodical *Manus*, which unconsciously cites the *batavani* almost verbatim:

> He [Sabnis] has distinguished sensuality from obscenity and placed it before us. *Tamasha* is a very powerful medium of entertainment, but many troupes now operate on the belief that without some lewd and bawdy dialogue, *tamasha* cannot "happen." It is because of such beliefs that true connoisseurs have turned up their nose at *tamasha*. But when a *tamasha* of the caliber of *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* comes forth, it improves theatre people everywhere![39]

The lines above echo various pieces of dialogue from the *batavani*. For instance, the Shahir complains that *tamasha* cannot happen without erotic and comedic elements, which in turn provides the impetus for the Lekhak's inverted woman analogy described above; the charge that this licentiousness on the part of "folk" performers like the Shahir has ruined the good standing of *tamasha* is also explicitly stated in the play text; and the rhetoric of improvement or reform [*sudharana*] is, of course, the pervading theme of the *batavani*.

II. The Respectable Revolution: Space, Place and the Question of Caste

Mobilizing the Middle Class

The idea that *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* was a site of profound edification for all parties involved – performers, spectators and especially the art form of *tamasha* itself – is echoed in virtually every review and analysis of this play. An obituary for Sabnis written in the wake of his death in 2002 contends:

[39] "Viccha Mazi Puri Kara: Punyacha Public Lai Khush Zala," *Manus,* 7 February 1966, 2.

> When he wrote *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara, tamasha*, *vag,* and other such forms did not have an eminent standing in the urban cultural landscape…But *Viccha* started a revolution!

The article goes on to note that conventionally, *vag* (the dramatic component of a *tamasha*) were performed in "in villages, in tents mounted in dry pasture lands, under the illumination of petromax lamps," and the urbanized version of the *vag,* termed *loknatya* (lit. folk drama) was usually performed in open-air theatres and grounds in the city. But *Viccha* was largely performed in indoor theatre auditoria, and got "middle class audiences habituated to watching *vag*."[40] As these vignettes indicate, the "revolution" that *Viccha* seems to have pioneered was that it situated *tamasha* within a different spatial context, and effected a perceptible shift in the demographic that watched, enjoyed and patronized *tamasha.* Reflecting on the success of the play in an interview, Sabnis claims

> The *loknatya* in those days was that of the *kalapathaks* [cultural squads] and the accent was on political propaganda. But no one had done it professionally. Shahir Sable had done something, but it had not totally appealed to the people. People realized the difference when they saw *Viccha*…[41]

The "something" that Shahir Sable had done was, in fact, a series of dramaturgical experiments starting from the 1950s onwards that were strikingly similar to Sabnis.' As indicated by his sobriquet "Shahir," Krishnarao Ganpatrao Sable was a balladeer, playwright and performer who also advocated for a revision of the *tamasha* form*,* though he seemed to approach this as a structural, rather than a moral, issue:

> *Tamasha* may not require make-up, property, etc. You can present it under a *peepul* tree! However, the times have changed. The proletariat has been influenced by plays staged by Bal Gandharva etc.[42] in Maharashtra. This form was exploited by the Kamgar Rangabhoomi [the workers' theatre]. On this background I felt that the age of open-air

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[40] "Viccha Vasant!" *Maharashtra Times*, 16 October 2002.

[41] Vasant Sabnis, interview by Shubhada Shelke, Vasant Sabnis File, National Centre for Performing Arts Reference Library, Mumbai.

[42] Bal Gandharva or Narayan Shripad Rajhans, was a popular actor of the 19th century, who was most famous for his female impersonation roles. The "plays staged by Bal Gandharva etc." here refers to the *sangeet natak* or the dance dramas that gained immense popularity, especially among the upper and middle classes in the early to mid-19th centuries.

> *tamasha* has ended. The enclosed theatre-space with its lighting etc. is waiting to be exploited.

On the strength of this conviction, Sable invented his own form called the *mukta-natya* (free play), which he described as a "mixture of folk art, *tamasha* and drama."[43] After years of performing for working-class audiences on street-corners and footpaths, Sable started producing plays in indoor auditoria, beginning with *Yamarajyat Ek Ratra* ("One Night in the Kingdom of Death") which premiered at Amar Hind Mandal, Mumbai in 1960. This shift enabled him to cater to "a more educated, elite audience," namely, the middle class, who "struggles to live, as does the proletariat, but has a more intellectual approach."[44] He also attempted to keep his productions "clear of obscenities in dialogue, song, and gesture in order to attract the more class-conscious urban theatre-goer."[45]

Despite these apparent similarities with Sabnis' project, Sable's work had a much more pronounced political edge; he went on to devise more than a dozen other *mukta-natyas* over the next fifteen years, each centered on a specific social issue, such as superstition, corruption, etc. Even his most entertainment-oriented play, *Aburaoche Lagin* ("Aburao's Wedding"), which begins with a half hour-long performance of popular *lavani*s and film songs, ultimately ends with a *gavalan* where Krishna tries to unionize the milkmaids! While Sable's plays were motivated by a general sense of social responsibility, his shifting political allegiances were notoriously hard to pin down. The eminent poet/activist, Amar Shaikh, allegedly once quipped: "There is the Left, there is the Right

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[43] Shahir Sable, interview by Shri Datta Ayre and Dr. Ashok Ranade, Shahir Sable File, National Centre for Performing Arts Reference Library, Mumbai.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Abrams, *Tamasha,* 101-106. For a long time, Sable's productions did not feature any women performers and all the female parts were played by men. This complete absenting of women in order to politicize the genre of *tamasha* is a recurrent trope, and will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

and there is Shahir Sable."[46] In his decades-long career, Sable was recognized for his contributions to the nationalist movement against colonial rule, to the communist-led workers movement in Maharashtra, as a "*sarkari shahir*" propagating welfare campaigns of the local Congress government, and as a foundational force behind the formation of the nativist, right-wing Shiv Sena party.[47] Critical assessments of Sable's legacy rarely dwell on this political eclecticism, and tend to focus more on what was considered to be his most enduring contribution: his refashioning of the *tamasha* form to make it accessible – in terms of style, content and venue – to the urban middle classes. Sable's efforts literally and figuratively opened the doors to usher in *Viccha's* "revolution;" in the early days, prominent performance halls refused to lease out their spaces to *Viccha,* on the assumption that it was just another unseemly *tamasha* act. However, Sable made many "indirect interventions" on behalf of the play, admonishing theatre proprietors that "a new art form is coming into being, you cannot kill it."[48]

Even after acquiring a reputation as a veritable popular cultural phenomenon, *Viccha* was not performed exclusively in indoor auditoria as the review cited above implies; it continued to have several outdoor performances, especially in small towns, some of which are described to great

[46] Gahlot Deepa, "Satire Was My Style," *Times of India,* 11 August 1991, 8.
[47] In some ways, the various recognitions that Sable received throughout his career reflect his political eclecticism. He was the first recipient of the Shahir Amar Shaikh Puraskar for his contribution to the Workers' Theatre; he was also felicitated numerous times by the Maharashtra Government for his contribution to the state's cultural legacy; he also received various national honors from the central government of India for his contribution to the arts. Sable's most controversial play, *Andhala Dalatay* (*The Blind Man Grinds*), had close connections with the Shiv Sena. The plot of the play revolves around the oppression of the Marathi population at the hands of Gujarati and "Madrasi" migrants, and resonated with Shiv Sena's "Maharashtra first" policy. The play was written in 1966 and was widely performed, with the active support of the Shiv Sena, which was then focused "80% on social activities and 20% on political activities." However, as the Shiv Sena increasingly began taking a more extremist stance and started competing elections in 1967, Sable withdrew his affiliation with the party.
[48] Prakash Akolkar, Interview with Shahir Sable, *Maharashtra Times,* 28 January 1990.

hyperbolic effect in Kondke's memoirs.[49] However, whenever it was performed in indoor auditoria such as Shivaji Mandir and the Marathi Sahitya Sangh in Mumbai, or the Tilak Memorial auditorium in Pune, the intended and actual audience was primarily the educated middle classes.[50]

As is perhaps already evident, the "myth of the middle class," as evoked in the above contexts, refers less to a socioeconomic designation, and functions more as a shifting signifier that connotes education, urbanity, and above all, respectability. Much has been written about the mutable category of the middle class in modern India, and about the complex ways in which this supposed middle class becomes itself and exerts its hegemonic power, through "the ideological interplay of its conception of itself as both Everyman and elite vanguard."[51] We see this process at work in and through *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara,* whose target audience, comprising primarily this middle class – including women and children – with all its attendant aspirational attributes, was not merely a

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[49] Kondke's recollections of *Viccha* performances describe at least two stories of bravado involving unfortunate encounters with snakes and scorpions. Kondke seems to have been attacked by these creatures in the midst of his performances, but he continued the play undeterred, so as to not disappoint the enthusiastic audience. See Dada Kondke, *Ek Songadyachi Batavani,* ed. Isaak Mujavar, (Dombivali: Nitin Publication, 2000).

[50] It should be said here that this kind of easy division between street theatre and the proscenium theatre as catering exclusively to the workers and the middle-classes respectively has been contested, most spiritedly by Safdar Hashmi. Hashmi, a prominent street theatre actor, writer and activist has commented on "the unfortunate tendency to project street theatre as a rebellion against the proscenium theatre, or as standing in opposition to it. This absolutely erroneous notion has been created by adherents of both kinds of theatre. On the one hand, some exponents of street theatre have tried to counterpoise it against proscenium theatre, dubbing the latter as a bourgeois, decadent and constricting genre, condemning it as a theatre of irrelevance, of airy-fairy philosophy, of frivolity, and concluding thereafter, that a genuine people's theatre is impossible on the proscenium stage; on the other hand a large number of proscenium wallahs have consistently refused even to accept street theatre as a valid form of dramatic art. In our view it is absurd to speak of a contradiction between proscenium and street theatres. Both belonging equally to the people … there is a contradiction between reactionary proscenium theatre and progressive proscenium theatre, or between democratic street theatre and reformist and sarkari [government sponsored] street theatre (Hashmi 1989, 13-14)," quoted in Arjun Ghosh, *A History of the Jana Natya Manch: Plays for The People* (New Delhi: SAGE India, 2012), 78.

[51] Amita Baviskar, *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 23.

recipient of the play's reformist vision, but an indispensable participant in its reformist project.[52] Commenting on the impact of the play, Dr. Shubhada Shelke, Sabnis' daughter, observes: "It was in order to acquire respectability for an art form like *tamasha* from the white-collared middle-classes, that my father, along with Dada Kondke, stepped up to the stage."[53] This kind of rhetorical upgrade of *tamasha* was thus premised on a circular logic whereby "respectability" was posited as something that the play offered to the purported middle class audience, and simultaneously, also as something that the audiences bequeathed upon the play. *Viccha's* edifying force, thus, is directed internally rather than outwards, in that it is not a conventional "didactic play" that seeks to instruct, and thereby mobilize, the spectator; rather it demonstrates how the performance form may itself be disciplined in order to cater to the right kind of audience.

Respectability Politics, Regional Politics

The impetus for *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara,* we may recall, stemmed from the author's professed mission to sustain the *tamasha* form by making what he deemed to be necessary improvements; these improvements – or reforms – essentially entailed sanitizing *tamasha* of any kind of obscene and vulgar elements, and elevating it into a respectable art form, one that would appeal to and be endorsed by the putative middle class. Such accretion of respectability, however, is a complex process, and as we know from other paradigmatic examples, it almost invariably perpetuates the hegemonic elision and appropriation of minoritarian (in this case, caste-based) identities.

[52] In fact, whenever the play was performed outside Maharashtra, Sabnis and his fellow cast members would begin the show by assuring the audience that it was suitable for women and children. See Sabnis, "Amhi ani Prekshak."
[53] Shubhada Shelke, "Lekhache Ghar, Aamche Ghar," *Lalit* (July 1991): 13.

The paradigm of performance reform that seeks to elevate a supposedly "crude" form into a "respectable" art suitable for elite and middle-class participation has parallels in various other cultural contexts within modern India. The (re-)invention of Bharatanatyam as a classical art form from the early 20th century onwards, for instance, has been studied extensively. Scholars like Amrit Srinivasan, Davesh Soneji and artist-activists like Nrithya Pillai have delineated the various social, historical and political processes through which the denigrated *devadasi* dance was refashioned into "a classical, scientific as well as spiritual art form to be practiced by 'respectable' women."[54] However, as Veena Naregal points out, unlike the "*devadasi* temple dance," or even *kathak* (a courtesan dance of the Hindi belt that was also classicized in the early 20th century), *tamasha* had virtually no ritual or sacred associations on the basis of which it could be upgraded to classical status. Instead, it has either been dismissed wholesale by the Marathi cultural elite as a vulgar and apolitical form of entertainment, or, in the cases when it has been used, "it has been mostly by way of appropriating some of its elements at an experimental level for technical embellishment or to provide cultural authenticity, basically, without necessarily caring to engage with their history of with the few exceptional attempts that have been made to radicalize *tamasha*."[55] Indeed, while *Viccha* makes no claims to representing the history of *tamasha* and thus perhaps cannot justifiably be criticized for its lack of historicity, it is extremely significant that the only "historical" personality

[54] Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji, eds., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20. Also see Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (2 November 1985): 1869–76; Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Nrithya Pillai, "The Politics of Naming the South Indian Dancer," *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* XL (2020): 13-15.

[55] Veena Naregal, "*Lavani*, *Tamasha*, *Loknatya* and the Vicissitudes of Patronage," in *Mārga: Ways of Liberation, Empowerment, and Social Change in Maharashtra*, eds. M. Naito, I. Shima, and H. Kotani (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008), 332-333.

that finds mention in this text is Patthe Bapurao, who is referenced in the banter between the Shahir and the Lekhak in the *batavani*:

Shahir: You had mentioned earlier that you write *lavanis*…

Lekhak: Yes I do write *lavanis*…

Shahir: As in, real living *lavanis*?

Lekhak: Yes, real living ones…

Shahir: As in, the kind of *lavanis* that are in *tamashas?*

Lekhak: Yes, the kind of *lavanis* that are in *tamashas*…

Shahir: As in, like Patthe Bapurao?

Lekhak: Patthe Bapurao is a very big man. How could I compare myself to him?…[56]

In all likelihood, the allusion to Patthe Bapurao – a celebrated poet-performer of the early 20th century – is intended here simply as a metonym for the "real living" tradition of *tamasha*. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the distillation of the entire, complex legacy of *tamasha* into the figure of this one Brahmin poet is a recurrent trope, one that emblematizes the ways in which questions of caste and patronage have shaped the modern historiography of *tamasha*. While Patthe Bapurao was active in the Mumbai *tamasha* circuit for several years between 1890-1911, his current iconic status was cemented though concerted efforts made in the 1940s and 50s by the Marathi intelligentsia and political elites to recuperate his legacy, and to memorialize him as the face of the extensive *tamasha* reform measures that were underway during this period.[57] Patthe Bapurao's prolific artistic career did have an enduring influence on the trajectory of modern *tamasha* performance; for instance, the continuing lineage of Bhau-Bapu Mang Narayangaonkar's troupe, which has produced some of the most celebrated *tamasha* artists over three generations, may be directly traced back to Patthe Bapurao's troupe. However, in his posthumous glory, Patthe Bapurao is often posited as a

[56] Sabnis, *Viccha,* 18.

[57] Veena Naregal, "Marginality, Regional Forms and State Patronage"; see also Naregal, "Vicissitudes."

trailblazing vanguard, in a way that often invisibilizes or misrepresents hard-won subaltern struggles. For example, he is routinely lauded for bringing women into *tamasha* on account of his longtime personal and professional association with the dancer Pavala Hivarkar, who belonged to the Mahar (so-called "untouchable") caste, even though Pavala had already been performing in *tamashas* long before her association with Patthe Bapurao. Some popular accounts also claim that it due to Bapurao's "revolutionary" leadership that "Harijans" – that is "untouchable" castes – were able to gain entry into public theatres.[58]

In other words, the figure of Patthe Bapurao circulates as a signifier of an upper-caste, or perhaps even more contentiously, a "caste-less" narrative about the history of *tamasha* performance,[59] one that purposefully elides the subaltern origins and legacy of this form, including the fact that *tamasha* has predominantly been the province of so-called lower-caste and Dalit performers.[60] The elision of such subaltern associations are integral to the process of making *tamasha* respectable; for one of the key strategies through which the sanitization of *tamasha* has occurred in the colonial and postcolonial periods is through the material disenfranchisement and stigmatization of Dalit *tamasha* artists, and the concomitant appropriation of *tamasha* for the articulation of elite regional pride. As Shailaja Paik notes, "by making *tamasha* a practice of producing Marathamola,

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[58] Manohar Tambe, "Marathi Mulkhatil Tamashagiri," *Loksatta Diwali Ank* (1957): 182.

[59] The reference to 'caste-less' is a citation of an apocryphal story about Pathhe Bapurao and Pavala's relationship. At the height of their popularity, it was rumoured that Patthe Bapurao had converted from his Brahmin status to that of a Mahar; when questioned on this charge, Patthe Bapurao declared that true artists had no caste, but because of his love for Pavala he had indeed converted to a Mahar. Veena Naregal astutely points out that for all this rhetoric about "caste-less-ness" Patthe Bapurao's professional success and posthumous celebrity has accrued primarily from the kinds of patronage he received due to his caste status, which have not been granted to other prominent *shahirs* from Dalit backgrounds. See Naregal, "Vicissitudes," 342-43.

[60] Dr. Ambedkar famously refused to accept any financial aid from Patthe Bapurao on the premise that this money was earned through the sexual servitude of lower caste female *tamasha* performers. See Sharmila Rege, "Conceptualising Popular Culture: 'Lavani' and 'Powada' in Maharashtra," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 11 (2002): 1038-1047. The Ambedkarite positing of *tamasha* performance as a form of servitude is explored more fully in the next chapter.

robust masculine Marathi identity, the elite upper and lower castes and the state have reappropriated the social and sexual labour of *tamasha* artists to serve the state of Maharashtra."[61]

This kind of appropriative maneuver is evident in the text of *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara;* both in the *batavani* and the prefatory materials to the play, *tamasha* is consistently celebrated for its regional and linguistic associations, while the subject of caste remains conspicuously unaddressed. The introductory paragraph of Sabnis' foreword to the play begins and ends with the declaration that "*tamasha* is authentically [*assal*] Marathi." This sentiment is echoed in the *batavani,* when the Lekhak and the Shahir are discussing, as ever, what *tamasha* ought to be like:

> Lekhak: Shahir, tell me, what is Maharashtra like?
>
> Shahir: What do you mean, 'what is it like'? It is sturdy and robust, what else!
>
> Lekhak: Ok, sturdy and robust…but what does it look like?
>
> Shahir: How would I know? Have I been flying around in a helicopter?
>
> Lekhak: Why do you need a helicopter? Shahir, if you just look at the people sitting in front of you, you would know what Maharashtra looks like –
>
> Shahir: Is that so?
>
> Lekhak: I'll tell you what Maharashtra looks like…

True to form, the Lekhak recites a rousing couplet describing Maharashtra: coarse on the surface, composed of gritty, rough, black soil, but populated by saints who dwell in its interior and sing of virtues. He then goes on to proclaim that "the *tamasha* of Maharashtra should be like Maharashtra," that is, "coarse on the surface" but with a soft artistic interior, and "in the language of Marathamola" (that is, the "robust masculine Marathi identity" that Paik alludes to above).[62]

The topical valence of this topographical conceit may be better understood if we consider the fact that when *Viccha* was written and first performed, the state of Maharashtra was only a few

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[61] Shailaja Paik, "Mangala Bansode and the Social Life of *Tamasha*: Caste, Sexuality, and Discrimination in Modern Maharashtra," *Biography* 40, no. 1 (2017): 170-198.
[62] Sabnis, *Viccha,* 8.

years old, having attained independent statehood in 1960. This watershed event was the culmination of a prolonged campaign waged from the 1940s onwards to demand the formation of the state of Maharashtra along linguistic lines. As I explain in Chapter 1, the Samyukta Maharashtra Chalval or Unified Maharashtra Movement, as it came to be known, was aimed at displacing the social and political hegemony of the Brahmins, and securing gains for all Marathi-speaking non-Brahmins, who were recognized as constituting the demographic of the Marathas. This campaign was the site of a "remarkable ideological convergence," bringing together leaders from the radical communist Left and the conservative nativist Right, who jointly demanded a monolingual, non-Brahmanical dominion.[63] Indeed, while the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement provided the impetus for the radical mass mobilization of the working class under the leadership of progressive artists like Annabhau Sathe and Amar Shaikh, its pro-Marathi, anti-migrant rhetoric also provided the catalyst for the formation of the Shiv Sena, a militant, far-right, nativist party formed in 1966 that dominated Maharashtrian politics for decades, and that continues to wield extensive political power in the region today. Sabnis' staunch regionalism, and his privileging of linguistic identity, I suggest, must be understood within this context. It is surely no coincidence that one of the early glowing reviews of *Viccha* was published in *Marmik,* the magazine edited by Bal Thackeray, the founder of the Shiv Sena. This review has been credited (by Sabnis himself) for the play's astonishing popularity and commercial success.[64] Dada Kondke, too, had close affiliations with the Shiv Sena; he campaigned

[63] Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 42.
[64] Sabnis notes that it was the review published in *Marmik* that popularized *Viccha* among the play-going public in Pune; and it was in Pune that *Viccha* received most patronage. Kondke estimates that out of the approximately 1200 shows that they performed, 500 were done in Pune. See Sabnis, "Yashala"; Bhalekar, *Superhit,* 47.

for the party all over rural Maharashtra ahead of the 1995 state elections, and founded the cultural wing ("Chitrapat Shakha") of the Shiv Sena.[65]

Of course, these associations themselves do not necessarily imply that *Viccha* was simply a propaganda piece for right-wing nativism, for, as I hope has been abundantly clear, this is a complex work that opens itself to divergent interpretations. However, both the text and context of the play seem to uphold a position on the relationship between minoritarian identities and mass culture that resonates with the mandate of majoritarian, populist power. For instance, in 1993, Vasant Sabnis presided over the annual Marathi Natya Sammelan or Marathi Theatre Conference, where he devoted one section of his speech to the topic of "Dalit Theatre," commenting on the relationship between *tamasha*, theatre and caste. Naturally, the political landscape in Maharashtra had undergone a radical transformation between the 1960s and the 1990s, with the question of caste assuming a new urgency following the Dalit assertions of the 1970s and the reservation policies mandated by the Mandal commission in 1979. Sabnis' occasional remarks delivered in his speech in 1993 seem to register these changes. While acknowledging that *tamasha* was originally a Dalit art form, he also emphasized that it was part of the larger sociocultural fabric, and enjoyed a great deal of popular support; thus, he argued, it made no sense for Dalit cultural production to be recognized as a separate entity, and the only way forward was for it to be integrated into the mainstream. This, of course, is classic anti-affirmative action rhetoric, which conflates discrimination and reparations as enacting the same kind of exclusionary politics: "On the one hand," Sabnis adds, "we demand that

[65] Dada Kondke's 1971 film, entitled *Songadya*, written by Vasant Sabnis, was blocked by some theatres on account of its sexual suggestiveness. Bal Thackeray used his political influence to compel theatres to screen the film, in order to support Kondke, who he considered an authentic son of the soil of Maharashtra. Thackeray has also written the introduction to Kondke's collated memoirs.

there should be no separate wells [for water] for Dalits in the villages…and on the other hand, we keep Dalit literature and art separate from the mainstream."[66]

While *Viccha* may have been intended, and popularly received, as a contribution towards the mainstreaming of minoritarian cultural production, Sabnis' quest to make *tamasha* respectable, and his foundational role in elevating these popular forms to "a higher literary status"[67] constitutes yet another episode in a long history of the unacknowledged appropriation of subaltern cultural forms towards the creation of a "new" middle-class aesthetic.[68] Indeed, many of *Viccha's* alluring and enduring inventions – including, most crucially, the earthy, impish stage persona of Dada Kondke himself – had conspicuous, but elided predecessors. Many sources attest that Dada Kondke's style and persona was closely modelled on Dadu Indurikar, a versatile and prolific *tamasha* artist, who is most fondly remembered for his spectacularly successful production, *Gadhavache Lagna* ("A Donkey's Wedding"). Apparently, in the formative years of his career, Kondke would buy tickets and seat himself in the first row for Indurikar's performances, and was deeply influenced by the latter, "even if he denies it."[69] The result, according to some critics, was that Kondke was merely a

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[66] "Marathi Rangabumi Aseparyant Marathi Bhasha Chaitanyasheel Rahil," *Maharashtra Times,* 12 April 1993; "Arthik Chanchan va Beshist: Marathi Rangabbhumipudhil Avahaan*," Loksatta,* 11 April 1993. The reference to "no separate wells" alludes to the demand for the end of caste-based discriminatory practices, which mandate that so-called "untouchables" cannot draw their water from the same source as the "upper castes." Interestingly, the analogy of the village wells and Dalit theatre also comes up in the speech delivered by B. S. Shinde at the first All India Dalit Theatre Conference. Shinde's remarks however, have the reverse causality; he points out that once villages cease to have separate wells, then the idea of Dalit theatre as a separate entity will automatically disappear. See Mahajan Tryambak et al, eds., *Paach Adhyakshiya Bhashane* (Pune: Sugava Prakshan, 1995).
[67] "Vinodacha Phad Uthla," *Loksatta*, 16 October 2002.
[68] The constitution of the "new" genre of the *sangeet natak* in the mid-19th century, for instance, is a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon See Veena Naregal, "Performance, Caste, Aesthetics," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 44, no. 1-2 (June 2010): 79-101; Kathryn Hansen, "A Different Desire, A Different Femininity: Theatrical Transvestism in the Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi Theatres, 1850-1940," in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2002), 163-180.
[69] B.S. Shinde, *Tamashatil Songadya* (Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan, 2009), 321.

poor replica of Indurikar; or as Avinash Dolas puts it, "only someone who has not seen Dadu Indurikar in action could be under the illusion that his imitator, Dada Kondke, is a brilliant artist."[70] In fact, Indurikar's *Gadhavache Lagna*, which premiered and ran contemporaneously with *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* through from the mid-1960s onwards, has been credited with many of the same "revolutions" that have been narrativized as *Viccha's* singular innovations, most notably, bringing *tamasha* into elite, indoor auditoriums for the spectatorship of educated, urban, middle class audiences. The key difference between the two landmark productions is that *Gadhavache Lagna* did not exclusively target middle-class audiences, but catered to a wide mix of audiences and venues.[71]

While there is some scholarly commentary on Kondke's artistic appropriations, there is no sustained critique of *Viccha*, the play that launched him into superstardom, as a whole. However, it would seem that charges of gentrification – or to invoke M.N. Srinivas' more context-specific term, Sanskritization – of *tamasha* were levelled, perhaps indirectly, against Sabnis, for in later editions of the play texts, the preface includes a defense against such accusations: "Some people make the accusation that calling *tamasha* "*loknatya*" (lit. "folk drama") amounts to an act of Sanskritization; but I feel that this is a misunderstanding…" Sabnis goes on to clarify that his chosen genre of the "*loknatya*" is entirely separate from *tamasha,* and presents the issue of appropriation within a nomenclatural, rather than ethical, frame, thus concluding that "there is no question here of the Sanskritization of *tamasha*."[72] These kinds of nomenclatural debates seem to be fundamentally

[70] Avinash Dolas, "Adhyakshiya Bhashan," in *Paach Adhyakshiya Bhashane* (Sugava Prakashan: 1995), 76.
[71] See Rustum Achalkhamb, *Tamasha Lokrangbhumi* (Pune: Sugava Prakashan, 2006).
[72] The whole defense reads: "Some people make the accusation that calling *tamasha* "*loknatya*" [lit. "folk drama"] amounts to an act of Sanskritization; but I feel that this is a misunderstanding. The term '*loknatya*' is applied with reference to the *vag* [i.e., the dramatic skit usually associated with *tamasha*] and not to *tamasha*…since *vag* must have some elements of drama [*natya*], and since these dramatic elements emerge from folk art [*lok kala*], hence the term *loknatya*. There is no question here about the Sanskritization of *tamasha*."

unresolvable, because as glossed in the previous chapter, the term "*loknatya*" is a shifting signifier that connotes different things in different contexts. However, Sabnis' rather convoluted meditations on the question of genre is telling, because *Viccha* also constituted a major intervention with respect to genre, through its hybrid dramaturgical frame that combined traditional *tamasha* with modern drama (*natak*). This kind of hybridity, as we shall see in the next section, became the hallmark of the Indian stage in the 1960s and 70s, and has often been criticized as being essentially and structurally appropriative, irrespective of its thematic content. This new hybrid genre, I suggest below, also stemmed from an urgent (if misplaced) kind of archival panic, one that sought to preserve the best of "authentic" native culture. In order to gain fuller understanding of *Viccha's* regulatory and recuperative project, thus, it is essential to attend to questions of form and genre.

III. A New Kind of Play: Hybridity, Modernity and the Quest for Roots

In Shankar Patil's *Katha Akalecha Kandyachi* ("Tale of the Dimwit"), a 1969 play that also adopts the framework of a *tamasha,* the *batavani* between the stock characters, Tatya and Bapu, concludes with the following exchange:

> Bapurao: Taterao, the *gan* is over…the *gavalan* is over…and it's all been done according to convention. What's next?
>
> Taterao: Next, we must depart from convention a little bit […] but we must not abandon our old customs.
>
> Bapurao: Then how would we adopt new ones?
>
> Taterao: We shouldn't abandon the old ones, and we shouldn't reject the new ones.
>
> Bapurao: That means we should do the *vag* and the play (*natak*) all at once?
>
> Taterao: Yes! The play is in the *vag*, and the *vag* is in the play, you see! […] This is a new kind of play.[73]

[73] Shankar Patil, *Katha Akalechya Kandyachi* (Pune: Prapanch Prakashan, 1969), 7.

This meta-theatrical reflection not only serves as a fitting description of *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara,* but it also effectively captures the ideological force and aesthetic impulse behind the new dramatic idiom that dominated the Indian stage in the decades to follow. The "Theatre of Roots," as this movement came to be known, was a concerted attempt, from the 1970 onwards, to develop a "new kind of play" that "synthesized modern European theatre and traditional Indian performance – creating a new, hybrid, theatrical form."[74] Plays like Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1972) and Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972) are frequently cited as representative of this hybrid theatricality, through their incorporation of "folk" elements within a "Western" dramaturgical framework. The Theatre of Roots movement received enthusiastic support from the Indian state on account if its apparent rejection of colonial cultural paradigms, and its quest to forge a new aesthetic idiom that was suitably modern but quintessentially Indian. These experiments in hybridity were also championed by prominent proponents of intercultural theatre, most famously, Richard Schechner and his "culture of choice" conceit.[75] The Roots movement has been interpreted as a critical site of resistance against hegemonic Western modernity by scholars like Aparna Dharwadker and Erin Mee, who characterize it as radically "antimodern" or constituting "an alternative modernity;"[76] critics like Rustom Bharucha and G.P. Deshpande, on the other hand, point to the cultural appropriation entailed in such nativist projects, which are ideologically commensurate with the hegemonic invention of traditions undertaken on the national scale in the 20th century (referenced in the previous section in the context of Bharatanatyam). In his searingly critical essays on the subject, Bharucha demonstrates

[74] Erin Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Stage* (London: Seagull, 2008), 201.
[75] Richard Schechner co-authored a manifesto entitled "Theatre of Roots: An Encounter with Tradition" written in collaboration with Suresh Awasthi, and published in TDR. Suresh Awasthi and Richard Schechner, "'Theatre of Roots': Encounter with Tradition," *TDR* 33, no. 4 (1989): 48-69.
[76] Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 138; Mee, "*Theatre of Roots,*" 5.

how the Roots movement fostered a profoundly self-orientalizing theatrical idiom within India, and was simply another manifestation of the discourse of (unequal) cultural exchange between the East and the West, epitomized by the arguably orientalist dramaturgy of theatre performers/theorists like Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Richard Schechner.[77]

It is worth noting that both the defense and the critique of Theatre of Roots generally characterize this movement as entailing some kind of indigenization of modernity. However, a closer attention to specific examples of such hybrid forms may reveal that within their particular localized contexts, these hybrid performances are often intended and received as the opposite: as experiments in the modernization of indigenous forms.[78] *Viccha Maẓi Puri Kara* – which may legitimately be considered as an early exponent of the Theatre of Roots paradigm – was presented as an attempt to "modernize" *tamasha*; we may recall that in his preface to the play, Sabnis emphasizes the need to re-popularize *tamasha* by situating it within a modern context. Elsewhere, he has described *Viccha* as a

[77] Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993). Bharucha and Schechner had a series of vitriolic exchanges on this issue that were published in *Asian Theatre Journal* in 1984.

[78] An instructive example of this phenomenon in a different postcolonial context may be found in Catherine Cole's nuanced ethnographic study of the Concert Party in Ghana; the Concert Party is a form that has curious resonances with *tamasha* in Maharashtra, partly on account of its variety show-like format, but also because it similarly problematizes any stable distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art. Commenting on the recent transformations within this form, Cole writes: "On the surface, the formal changes in the concert party in the post-war years appear to express a gradual africanisation, indigenisation and domestication by the Ghanian working class and peasantry of an elite art form […] But concert party practitioners themselves narrate this historical transformation differently […] the changes in the concert party during the 1950s represent, rather, a process of modernisation. In their interpretation of concert party history, innovators were *modernising* the concert party when they introduced highlife music, folklore, a greater range of characters, serious themes from everyday Ghanian life, and more Akan language." Catherine Cole, "'This Is Actually a Good Interpretation of Modern Civilisation': Popular Theatre and the Social Imaginary in Ghana, 1946-66," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 67, no. 3 (1997), 370. Other work on "indigenous" performance forms in postcolonial Global South cultures reveal similar patterns, such as Laura Edmondson, "National Erotica: The Politics of 'Traditional' Dance in Tanzania," *TDR* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 153-170, and David Donkor, "Gyamfi's Golden Soap: Commodity Marketing, Reform Legitimation, and the Performance of Cultural Authenticity in Ghanaian Popular Theatre," *Ghana Studies* 12-13 (2009-2010): 189-216.

"*tamasha*-like play, that is written in the style of a *vag* but meant for modern audiences."[79] The potency of *Viccha's* hybrid dramaturgy even led the eminent folklorist Ashok Paranjape to pronounce that "through *Viccha,* Sabnis has given birth to the modern *vag.*"[80] One of the few scholarly studies of this play, by Vishwanath Shinde, also consistently foregrounds the ways in which *Viccha* takes up standard *tamasha* tropes and re-presents them within a modern register.[81]

'Modernizing' *tamasha*, in these contexts, seems to essentially entail stripping the form of any kind of historical specificity; since these "folk" forms are deemed to be inherently vital and dynamic, they are regarded as amenable to transposition into any kind of context, without any spatiotemporal or thematic bounds. This is evidenced through the fact that in most accounts, the modernizing force of the *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* is located primarily in the *vag* or skit, the most conventionally dramatic portion of the play. This is a playful and buoyant parable that may be summarized as follows: A constable (*havaldar)* covets the post of the *kotwal* (inspector); so he cons the newly-appointed *kotwal* with the help of his lover Mainavati, who captivates the *kotwal* with her dancing skills, and convinces him to steal the king's bed for her. At the end, the *kotwal* is tricked into thinking he is marrying Mainavati, but gets wedded to the eunuch (Mainavati's assistant) instead, and gets arrested for stealing the King's bed. The constable is promoted to the post of the *kotwal*, and is finally able to fulfil his promise to marry Mainavati.

As Shinde points out, *vag* in *Viccha* is made up of "stock *tamasha* characters, like the foolish king, and his cunning ministers;" however, he goes on to suggest, "this is not merely a mythical fable, but relates to the political realities of the modern age, and offers a covert commentary on

[79] Vasant Sabnis, interview by Kamalakar Sontakke, *Loksatta,* 23 January 1993.
[80] Cited in "Vasant Sabnis Navacha Hasra Vag," *Maharashtra Times,* 16 October 2002.
[81] Vishwanath Shinde, *Paramparik Tamasha ani Adhunik Vagnatya* (Pune: Pratima Prakashan, 1994).

modern politics."[82] Shinde's observation may be best illustrated through an example. When the constable and the guard are en route to arrange the cremation of the deceased former *kotwal*, they want to stop for a snack on king's dime. The constable teaches his subordinate, the guard, how to incorporate such unauthorized personal expenditures into his official accounts:

Constable: ...Tell me, won't you need kerosene for the cremation?

Guard: Yes, of course...

Constable: How much will you need?

Guard: About five to six bottles...

Constable: Okay so six bottles. So you should write 'six bottles of kerosene for cremation' and put a 'd' in front of it, with a full-stop.

Guard: Meaning?

Constable: Meaning six dozen...meaning five and a half dozen bottles worth of snacks...[83]

These tongue-in-cheek depictions of bureaucratic corruption and autocracy were deemed to have not just modern, but universal resonance; indeed, it was on the strength of this perceived universality that *Viccha* was translated and adapted into three other languages, Hindi, English and Gujarati.[84] Waman Kendre, an eminent Marathi theatre personality who directed a Hindi version of the play (*Saiyan Bhaye Kotwal*) in 1987, followed by an English version in 1993, was convinced of the play's cross-cultural applicability: "*Viccha* will continue to have contemporary relevance in any context. It has a global import. These widespread problems of corruption, nepotism persist in all societies and all ages."[85] The English adaptation of the play, titled "*Tempt Me Not,*" was regarded as

[82] Shinde, *Paramparik,* 172-73.
[83] Sabnis, *Viccha,* 44.
[84] The play was first translated into Hindi in 1977 by Usha Banerjee, and was first performed under her direction by the National School of Drama Repertory. The play was translated into English by Rajendra Mehra and Ramesh Chauhan, and the songs were translated into English by Pratima Kulkarrni. There was also a Gujarati version of the play produced in 2016, directed by Rajoo Barot that replaced the Maharashtrian *tamasha* with Gujarati *Bhavai*.
[85] Neelkanth Kadam, "Mansacha Trimiti Jaganyacha Avishkar Mhanje Digdarshan!" *Loksatta*, 3 April 1993.

"a pathbreaking comedy flouting all rules of convention in English theatre" because of its somewhat incongruous transposition of *tamasha* tropes and rhythms into English.[86] The premise for this unusual dramatic choice was that the formal features of *Viccha* – like its thematic elements – were considered to have universal purchase; Kendre maintained that the "spirit" of "indigenous forms" like *tamasha* is "very universal," and that "the *tamasha* form...is also very contemporary."[87]

Kendre's enthusiasm for this project was inspired, unsurprisingly, by the Theatre of Roots explorations;[88] the use of English, a "link language" that "is widely spoken and even more widely understood" allowed him to "reach out to th[e] vast majority and make them aware of the richness and diversity of our folk culture."[89] *Tempt Me Not* was, in that sense, an experiment in intracultural translation; as one review puts it, rather grandiosely, "it is not just the translation of a play (like has been the trend so far), or even of *tamasha*; it is the translation of an entire performing culture."[90] However, what is intriguing is that Kendre's venture was presented as an opposition to – rather than an ideological extension of – the kinds of intercultural theatre experiments espoused by Schechner and his associates. A report from the rehearsals of *Tempt Me Not* surmises:

> It [the play] will also prove useful for those educated in the English medium who won't have to look to the west to reproduce our own traditional theatre. Our own rich cultural heritage should ideally be explored by Indian scriptwriters and directors first, not come to us via Peter Brooks.[91]

The above comment effectively summarized Kendre's agenda which, as he reiterated time and again, was to unsettle the hegemony of Euro-American texts and practices, and replace these dramatic

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[86] Dominic Serrao, "Kya Tamasha Hai?" *Mid-day,* 3 March 1993.
[87] Deepa Gahlot, "Tamasha Temptation," *The Independent,* 2 March 1993; Serrao, "Kya Tamasha Hai?"
[88] Gahlot, "*Tamasha* Temptation."
[89] Momisha Naik Singh, "Don't Expect Run-of-the-Mill Stuff from Kendre," *Indian Express*, 22 May 1993.
[90] Sujata Patil, "Experimenting With the Form," *Indian Express*, 14 March 1993.
[91] Joba Mitra, "A New Tamasha," *Sunday Observer*, 7 March 1993.

canons with Indian works. In his estimation, *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* was a concerted attempt to throw off the yoke of Western influences like Shakespeare, Brecht, Bernard Shaw, Chekhov and Grotowski. Through his English translation, Kendre hoped to acquire the rightful canonical status for this play "that is of our own soil," such that it could stand in the stead of authoritative western texts.[92]

While Kendre's Hindi and English translations did ensure that *Viccha's* stage life and cultural influence exceeded far beyond its original 1965 production, the play is not nearly as canonical as he might have hoped, and rarely receives the kind of critical attention that is heaped on other plays like *Ghashiram Kotwal, Hayavadana, Nagamandala,* and *Mahanirvan,* that Kendre viewed as falling within the same genre as *Viccha*. However, Kendre's adaptations successfully bolstered *Viccha*'s investment in the sanitization, gentrification and modernization of *tamasha*. The remarkable extent to which *Viccha* altered the narrative around *tamasha* may be gleaned from the following comment made by Hosi Vasunia, a "veteran English theatrist" who essayed the lead role in *Tempt Me Not:*

> It [the play] is an authentic adaptation of the old folk art. The vibrancy and liveliness of the form has allured me. Vulgarity is not predominant and it has been a self-discovery for me, from the routine incestuous bedroom farces to a *pure, classical* art form. [emphasis added].[93]

Of course, Vasunia's stray remarks cannot be considered as representative of any general trends. It is, however, hard to imagine any other context in which the adjectives pure and classical would be used with reference to *tamasha*.

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While *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* remains largely unrepresented in theatre scholarship and curricula, it was, by all accounts, a landmark cultural event that, through its multiple iterations,

[92] Neelkanth Kadam, "Mansacha Trimiti Jaganyacha Avishkar Mhanje Digdarshan!"
[93] Serrao, "Kya Tamasha Hai?"

adaptations and translations, constituted a critical intervention in the history of *tamasha* at the level of both form and content. In the wake of *Viccha's* extraordinary commercial success, the hybrid genre of the "*tamasha-pradhan natak,"* or *tamasha*-based play, became a regular feature on the Marathi stage, especially through the 1960s-1980s. Many of these plays, either consciously or unconsciously, regard *Viccha* as a model to be followed. D.M. Mirasdar's *Mi Ladachi Maina Tumchi* (1979), for instance, was written in the late 1960s with the express intent of catering to the demand that *Viccha* had generated among artists and audiences alike.[94] Echoes of *Viccha's* language and style recur in several "*tamasha*-based" plays throughout this period, an illustrative example being V.N Sardesai's *Raya Tumhi Khatyaal Bharich Bai* (1980), which reproduces Sabnis' *batavani* almost verbatim, involving a Shahir-Lekhak narrator duo, an imaginary woman, a topographical conceit about Maharashtra, a dialogic discourse on obscenity and reform, and so on.[95]

It is worth noting that *Viccha* was not the first play to broach the subject of *tamasha* reform within a dramaturgical frame – *Malavarti Manasa* (1962) conceived by Rajabhau Thitte and scripted by Vinayak Devrukhkar, centres on an ethnographically-inspired formulaic plot line about a long-suffering *tamasha* dancer, and is interspersed with homilies on *tamasha* "*sudharana,*" delivered by the male protagonist, who lectures the frustrated dancer on the new change in the social status of *tamasha*, and the various governmental schemes introduced for *tamasha* artists.[96] Unlike this sanctimonious tale of woe, *Viccha*'s irreverent and improvisational meta-theatrical commentary posited the subject of *tamasha* reform as a public concern; its constellation of reform through the prism of sanitization, respectability, regionalism, and modernism, had a profound impact on the ways in which *tamasha* is perceived, produced and circulated. As we have seen, most of its

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[94] D.M. Mirasdar and G.D. Madgulkar, *Mi Ladachi Maina Tumchi* (Pune: Suparna Prakashan, 1979).
[95] V.N. Sardesai, *Raya Tumhi Khatyaal Bharich Bai* (Mumbai: Tridal Prakashan, 1983).
[96] Vinayak Devrukhkar, *Malavarti Manasa* (Kolhapur: Chandrakant Shetye Prakashan Mandir, 1962).

reformatory gambits were premised on the notion that "folk" forms like *tamasha* are inherently dynamic and must constantly "change with the times." Ironically, however, *Viccha* exerted such a powerful influence on the cultural imaginary that it seemed to crystallize a singular narrative of "what *tamasha* should be like, what it shouldn't be like."[97] One indication of this is manifest in the 2009 play, *Sex, Morality and Censorship* which offers a critique of the censorship and gentrification of performance. In one of the scenes, the play attempts to demonstrate how the true "*tamasha*-wallahs" (*tamasha*-people), resisted and satirized bourgeois attempts at the gentrification of *tamasha*; and, in a moment of spectacular irony, it does so through a re-enactment of a scene from the *batavani* of *Viccha*! Thus, the play that spearheaded the process of middle-class meddling is now presented as the ultimate site of subversion. *Sex, Morality and Censorship* is a much more nuanced and reflective play than this intertextual reading suggests, and has been cited as a critical source and resource throughout this dissertation. As a popular and widely spectated documentary production, it has played a crucial role in bringing the elided history of *tamasha* reform and censorship literally centerstage. However, this vignette aptly illustrates the ways in which *Viccha* has emerged as an Ur-text signifying authenticity; for all its professed claims to *not* be a *tamasha*, it now circulates as a metonym for the performance tradition of *tamasha* itself.

Viccha's respectability politics, as we have seen, was premised on the systematic dehistoricization of *tamasha* performance, especially on the lines of caste; it is hardly surprising, then, history and genealogy emerge as critical conceptual and methodological categories in more trenchant accounts of the appropriation and gentrification of *tamasha*, which examined in depth in the next chapter.

[97] Apparently, the prominent *lavani* dancer Kausalya Kopargaonkar one came to watch a show of *Viccha*, and declared: "our *tamasha* artists should also produce work like this. It will heighten the glory of *tamasha*." Vasant Sabnis, "Amhi ani Prekshak," *Rangbhumi* 1 (April 1968): 28.

CHAPTER THREE

Disappeared Histories: Cultural Appropriation and its Contestations

A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history – that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to – through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life – locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.

- Suzan Lori-Parks, *The America Play* [1]

In that sense, circum-Atlantic performance is a monumental study in the pleasures and torments of incomplete forgetting. But more obdurate questions persist: Whose forgetting? Whose memory? Whose history?

- Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*

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This chapter pivots from examining "preservation" as the site of inquiry in order to attend to its inverse, or rather, its internal other, that forever haunts this concept: that of disappearance. If the

[1] Suzan Lori-Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995): 4.

preservation of minoritarian cultural forms, particularly *tamasha*, became a public, and eventually dramaturgical, concern by the 1970s, the disappearance of these forms too was taken up as a matter of theatrical intervention from the 1970s onwards. In this chapter I focus on three plays that enact such interventions: Datta Bhagat's *Avarta* ("Vortex," 1976), Rustom Achalkhamb's *Kaifiyat* ("An Account," 1981) and Yogiraj Waghmare's *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi* ("That Which Never Happened," 1978). By showing how *tamasha* and other subaltern art forms were disappeared by hegemonic forces, these plays stage a resistance to the processes of sanitization and appropriation described in preceding chapters.

The precise nature of the relationship between endurance – which may be understood variously as preservation, persistence, durability – and disappearance has been extensively theorized within the field of Performance Studies. Taken as a whole, in these accounts disappearance emerges as a polyvocal and multidirectional concept that can be politically mobilized in a range of modes and contexts. In its most fundamental, and now most aphoristic formulation, "performance…becomes itself through disappearance," such that it is essentially "ephemeral."[2] Several contesting theories around the "ontology" and "hauntology" of performance probe how the ephemerality of performance can be mobilized to political ends, especially to complicate conventional conceptions of the equation of representational visibility with political power.[3] If the "payoff of visibility" for underrepresented minorities is invariably stereotype and objectification, "a refusal to appear," becomes a subversive strategy, one that is most effectively realized through the ephemeral event of

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[2] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 143.

[3] While the "ontology" of performance is most famously articulated by Phelan, other scholars contest this account citing Jacques Derrida's concept of "hauntology" to characterize performance as always leaving traces, that with "disappears only to hover: it promises or threatens to reappear, albeit in another shape or form" and as signalling the "phantasmic presence of the past." See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 146-7; Alice Rayner, "Rude Mechanicals and the 'Specters of Marx,'" *Theatre Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4 (2002): 550.

performance. The distinction fundamental to this proposition, between "willfully failing to appear and never being summoned," is particularly resonant in the context of the three plays analyzed in this chapter, all of which dramatize the hegemonic erasure of subaltern art and culture through centuries of Brahminical violence and appropriation.[4] While the relationship between disappearance and (in)visibility is multifarious and complex, the relevance of these volatile categories to the issue of cultural preservation is best illustrated through José Esteban Muñoz's contention that "negation" can paradoxically be a means of calling attention to, and marking, hegemonically invisibilized histories. In this formulation, "negation" refers to a "process of erasure that redoubles and marks the systematic erasure of minoritarian histories."[5] To what extent can deliberate absenting – a "refusal to appear" – be repurposed as resistance for groups that have already been invisibilized? In a more pragmatic vein, how does one show (or otherwise signal) invisibility and disappearance, especially within a visual and durational medium like theatre? And even more fundamentally, does performance, and all that it conjures, ever completely "disappear," or does it leave traces? These questions are addressed, albeit differently, in all three plays discussed below. As I illustrate in the sections that follow, performance's potential for "disappearance" is used as both a discursive and dramaturgical device within these texts.

This chapter is divided into five sections: the introductory section traces the complex and conflicting ways in which *tamasha* performance has been positioned within Dalit theatre praxis and historiography. The next three sections present three different models of theorizing 'disappearance' in the context of subaltern art in general and *tamasha* in particular, each oriented around a specific play: Disappearance as appropriation (*Avarta*), as destruction (*Kaifiyat*) and as disavowal (*Aga Je*

[4] Phelan, *Unmarked*, 16.
[5] José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1996): 6.

Ghadalechi Nahi) respectively. The chapter concludes with a short reflection on the conspicuous lack of any female characters in these plays, and the implications of this absence.

I. Introduction

Reclaiming Tamasha*: Against Preservation*

Tamasha performance has historically been the purview of Dalit artists, with many communities – especially the Mahars and the Mangs – practicing this art form as a hereditary profession, passed down over generations. As we have seen in previous chapters, this rich history of cultural production has largely been ignored or misrepresented within academic and popular discourse; however, in the last fifty or so years, contemporary Dalit critics, artists and scholars have challenged the way *tamasha* is usually historicized, calling into question the mainstream historiography of Marathi theatre that categorizes these subaltern performance traditions as fulfilling either a ritualistic, transactional or communal function, and thus not legitimately qualifying as art. Datta Bhagat, for instance, disputes the received genealogy of Marathi theatre that begins in 1843 with Vishnudas Bhave's *Sita Swayamwar*. Although this performance is commemorated as the "first play" in Marathi, Bhagat points out that *Sita Swayamwar* is essentially a *dashavtari khel* – a popular religious performance form depicting the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu – that was rendered into written form.[6] If this "folk" form can be considered theatre, he asks, then why not *tamasha*? Why

[6] The folksiness of *Sita Swayamvar* also derives from the fact that through this "first play" was branded as a radical new and different genre of performance, in reality it was constructed by assembling different elements of various existing popular cultural forms. For more on this, see Kathryn Hansen, "A Different Desire, a Different Femininity: Theatrical Transvestism in the Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi Theatres, 1850-1940," *Queering India: Same-sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 163-180; Meera Kosambi, *Gender, Culture and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence* (London: Routledge, 2015).

doesn't the history of Marathi theatre begin there?[7]

As a part of this revisionist historiographical project, several Dalit critics have proposed an alternative trajectory for theatre performance in Maharashtra that centers Dalit art and artists, tracing a direct lineage from *tamasha* to modern Dalit Theatre (which is usually described as beginning in 1956, with M.S. Chitnis' play *Yugyatra*). Gangadhar Pantavane, an eminent scholar, playwright and founding editor of the landmark literary periodical *Asmitadarsha*, takes this view, contending that "it would be no exaggeration to state that *tamasha* is the progenitor of Dalit Theatre."[8] Many other critics adopt this perspective as well, including Madhukar Mokashi, Shailesh Tribhuvan and Babban Bhagyavant, all of whom have authored authoritative treatises on Dalit Theatre.[9] As per this formulation, *tamasha*, which originated in the 16th century, evolved into *jalsa* – a genre of political performance that incorporates standard elements of *tamasha,* adapting them to serve in the task of mass mobilization and education (*Jalsa* was developed as an instrument for anti-caste agitation, first by the Satyashodhak Samaj in the mid-19th century, under the leadership of Jotiba Phule, and later by Ambedkarite activists from the early-20th century onwards).[10] These two performance forms, developed and sustained by Dalit artists across centuries, are upheld by Pantavane and others as the predecessors of modern Dalit Theatre.

However, not all critics and artists concur with this characterization of subaltern cultural

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[7] Datta Bhagat, *Dalit Sahitya: Disha ani Decanter* (Nanded: Abhay Prakashan, 1992), 83.
[8] Gangadhar Pantavane, "Prastavana," *Kaifiyat* (Kolhapur: Prachar Prakashan, 1982), n.p.
[9] See Madhukar Mokashi, *Dalit Rangabhumi ani Natya Chalval* (Pune: Snehavardhan Publishing House, 2000); Shailesh Tribhuvan, *Dalit Natak Nirmiti Prerana Va Vikas* (Pune: Papillon Publishing House, 2001); Babban Bhagyavant, *Dalit Rangabhumi ani Natak* (Aurangabad: Chinmay Prakashan, 2008).
[10] For more on *satyashodhak jalsa* see Sambhaji Kharat, *Mahatma Phule ani Satyashodhak Jalse,* (Aurangabad: Sahitya Seva Prakashan, 1990) and Sharmila Rege, "Understanding Popular Culture: The *Satyashodhak* and *Ganesh Mela* in Maharashtra," *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2000): pp. 193-210. For more on *Ambedkari jalsa* see Bhimrao Kardak, *Ambedkari Jalse: Swarup va Karya* (Mumbai: Abhinav Prakashan, 1978).

production as charting a continuous progressive movement; in fact, the precise relationship between *tamasha, jalsa* and modern Dalit theatre has been a subject of major debate among Dalit intellectuals. Instead of a linear progression, Datta Bhagat posits these three modes as existing in a triangulated relationship, describing them as "three interrelated but distinct forms:"[11] on the one hand, *tamasha* and *jalsa* are similar in form, but diverge in their ideological impulses (insofar as *tamasha* is entertainment-oriented, and *jalsa* is edification-oriented); on the other hand, *jalsa* and Dalit plays stem from the same ideological basis, but differ in their modes of expression (in that *jalsa* is a fundamentally an itinerant, improvisatory street theatre form, and modern Dalit theatre is a textual genre, mainly intended for staged indoor performances). Thus, he concludes, "there is nothing to suggest that these are consecutive stages of an evolutionary course."[12]

This is a crucial point, because *tamasha* performance occupies a contentious place within Ambedkarite discourse, as Premanand Gajvi, a distinguished playwright and a prominent (if controversial) exponent of the Dalit Theatre movement, points out in a speech delivered in 1988.[13] While *tamasha* performances in villages have historically attracted huge crowds from all sections of society, including upper castes, many of these audiences would come only to indulge their most perverse desires, ogling and molesting the female *lavani* dancers under the guise of artistic

[11] Cited in Ramesh Janbandhu, *Ambedkarvadi Rangbhoomi: Datta Bhagat Yanche Natyavishwa* (Nagpur: Mahabodhi Siddharth Prakashan, 1992), 32-34.
[12] Bhagat, *Dalit Sahitya*, 85.
[13] Gajvi's relationship with the Dalit Theatre movement was rather contentious, with him publicly declaring "I had never thought of myself as a 'Dalit' writer. I don't belong to the group of playwrights who see themselves contributing to the Dalit movement by writing about the lives of scheduled castes. Babasaheb Ambedkar society must be in a constant state of progression. If people converted to a new religion, as our people did in 1956, why should they continue to write about their lives before they converted?" Although Gajvi's plays are always included in anthologies of Dalit plays, he has also been accused of "defect[ing] to the other side" because of the heterogenous range of subjects he chose to write about. His play *Kirwant* was particularly controversial, because it deals with a sub-sect of Brahmins who are "treated as untouchables within the caste." See Shanta Gokhale, *Playwright At the Centre: Marathi Drama From 1843 to the Present* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000), 328-330.

appreciation. The state of *tamasha*, Gajvi declares, became utterly degenerate during the Peshwa rule in the 18th-19th century, when it was reduced to nothing more than a form of sexual servitude. This degrading history became grounds for the rejection of *tamasha* as a caste-based profession during Ambedkarite anti-caste agitation:

> As a result, the very people who had devoted themselves to this art for generations, went on to forsake it. Why? Because Dr. Ambedkar's message was clear: stop doing any kind of work that does not have dignity. So during the tide of religious conversion, this art was thrown out of the window. And now we are busy trying to locate the seed of all Dalit theatre in this [discarded] art form.[14]

The "religious conversion" Gajvi refers to is the conversion (spearheaded by Dr. Ambedkar) to Buddhism by some Dalit communities, as a form of revolt against the Hindu religion and its Brahminical caste-based social hierarchy. While Gajvi recognizes the sudden resurgence of communal pride in *tamasha* performance as a positive development overall, he also cautions against an overly romanticized view of its history that overlooks the humiliation and enslavement inflicted on hereditary artists over generations. In other words, *tamasha* holds tremendous symbolic and historical value, and hence, it has emerged as the subject of recent scholarship that seeks to accord a sense of gravity and dignity to the art and artists, primarily by challenging and revising hegemonic historical narratives. At the same time, since the history of *tamasha* performance is inextricably linked with the history of caste oppression, the preservation or revival of *tamasha* does not feature as an urgent, or even necessary, concern in these critical accounts.[15]

[14] Premanand Gajvi, "Adhayakshiya Bhashan," *Paach Adhyakshiya Bhashane* (Sugava Prakashan: 63).
[15] Incidentally, the celebrated *tamasha* artist Vithabai Narayangaonkar articulates the relationship between *tamasha* and Dalit Theatre in a somewhat different register, arguing that since Dalit Theatre has derivative and demographic links to *tamasha,* it is the responsibility of young Dalit playwrights to write new *vags* and *tamashas*, so as to provide *tamasha* artists with new and topical content. Vithabai Bhau Khude (Mang) Narayangaonkar, "Adhyakshiya Bhashan" in *Dalit Rangabhumi* 83.

Form and Function, Style and Space

The genealogical complexity is encapsulated and reflected in the scale and style with which contemporary Dalit playwrights engage *tamasha* within their dramaturgy. Within the repertoire of Marathi Dalit plays, the number of scripts that incorporate *tamasha* conventions is rather small;[16] and this proportion becomes all the more significant in the wider context of Marathi theatrical output in general, where hybrid *tamasha*-based plays were becoming increasingly trendy from the 1960s onwards. The three plays discussed in this chapter – *Avarta, Kaifiyat* and *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi* – are among the few Dalit plays that invoke *tamasha* as formal and thematic motifs. However, these invocations are markedly different from the *tamasha-pradhan natak* or "*tamasha*-based plays" described in Chapter 2 (of which *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* may be considered the paradigmatic example). For one, none of these three plays are structured in the format of a conventional *tamasha*, with a *gan, gavalan, batavani* etc.; rather, as we shall see, each play selectively adopts and adapts a few standard *tamasha* conventions in order to illustrate a broader conceptual point, and purposefully avoid any kind of consummate representation of *tamasha* performance. Secondly, the motivation behind the inclusion of these few *tamasha* elements is not guided by nostalgia or recuperative zeal, but proceed from pragmatic concerns, as illustrated in a seminar on "Dalit Theatre: Form and Direction" convened in 1981, which brought together several contemporary playwrights and directors to speak on the titular topic.[17] Despite his professed skepticism for tracing any direct evolutionary links to *tamasha*, Datta Bhagat still recommends that Dalit plays incorporate techniques and devices from popular forms like *tamasha* into their dramaturgy, so as to make these productions more amenable and accessible to

[16] Speaking in 1988, Gajvi identifies only two – *Avarta* and *Thamba, Ramaraja Yetoy*! (Prakash Tribhuvan, 1980).

[17] The speakers at this seminar included Datta Bhagat, Rustum Achalkhamb, Premanand Gajvi, Shripad Balchandra Joshi, Raja Jadhav, E.M. Narnavre, B.S. Shinde, and the poet Dinbandhu. Ram Jadhav delivered the keynote address.

the audiences they are intended for: namely the working classes, who already have a deep sense of familiarity with these forms. Rustum Achalkhamb makes a similar argument in his speech, emphasizing that it is imperative to remain highly selective about the aspects of *tamasha* that can be suitably incorporated into dramatic texts; specifically, since Dalit Theatre is inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's vision, any elements in service of Hindu religion and society – such as the invocation of Lord Ganesh, and the Radha-Krishna themed farce – must be discarded (he additionally points out that Dalit cultural production already has a long history of making such selections and substitutions, as exemplified in the prolific political performances of artist-activists like Bhimrao Kardak). For both Bhagat and Achalkhamb, the question of form is dictated primarily by function – and the univocal function of Dalit Theatre is to be an instrument of social awareness and transformation.[18]

It is worth reiterating that these discussions do not evince any preoccupation for the preservation of the art of *tamasha* in an abstract sense, or any investment in "reviving" *tamasha* by transposing it into a different spatial or demographic context; this, as we have seen, were the primary motivating factors behind the *tamasha* revitalization projects described in preceding chapters. However, questions of space and demography do feature as central concerns here as well, albeit in a different register.

Given that a majority of Dalit plays are written expressly for the stage, the matter of how and where these plays should optimally be performed is widely discussed in various forums. In terms of production style, the primary defining feature of Dalit Theatre is that it subverts existing conventions of dramatic staging; and to that end, it is free to draw on an eclectic range of innovative performance practices, ranging from local folk forms, to political agit-prop plays, to the "Black

[18] Datta Bhagat, "Dalit Rangabhumila Loknatyache Ang Have," *Asmitadarsha* 14, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1981): 68; Rustum Achalkhamb, "Rangabhumi He Samajprabodhanache Madhyam" *Asmitadarsha* 14, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1981): 68-69.

Theatre" of the United States. However this proposed eclecticism in performance style is tempered by the more circumspect approach towards performance venues adopted by several Dalit artists and scholars. As B.S. Shinde observes in his keynote address at the first All India Dalit Theatre Conference in Pune in 1984, although Dalit Theatre borrows techniques and devices from itinerant open-air performance genres, in spatial terms, "street theatre" – performed on street corners and junctions to an audience of bystanders – is unsuited to the ethical and aesthetic premise of plays that foreground the Dalit experience: "Dalit lives are already so exposed, unsheltered, and desolate. To put them on further display in the street would have no impact."[19] Pantavane also makes a similar point, remarking "we already live our lives out in the open – there is no need for our theatre to be laid bare on the streets too."[20] Moreover, since the subject matter of Dalit plays is often serious and complex, it requires a captive, critical audience (rather than curious passers-by), as well as ancillary scenic elements, like sets, props, lights, music, costumes, etc., in order to effectively convey its import.

The pressing logistical problem here, of course, is that such well-equipped auditoriums were (and still are) strongholds of the Marathi theatre establishment, and represent precisely the kind of bourgeois respectability that Dalit Theatre seeks to expose and subvert.[21] Since it would not be economically feasible to construct multiple new theatres exclusively for the staging of Dalit plays, the options available to Dalit artists are to either occupy these bourgeois theatres and deploy this platform to their advantage, counteracting audience expectations through formal and thematic

[19] B.S. Shinde, "Adhyakshiya Bhashan," *Paach Adhyakshiya Bhashane* (Sugava Prakashan: 1995), 17.
[20] Pantavane, "Prastavana," n.p.
[21] The previous chapter traces the complex ways in which indoor proscenium theatres came to be associated with respectability in the tamasha context in the 1960s.

radicalism; or to relinquish these established playhouses entirely, in favor of alternative "intimate theatres," or less ideal, but also less compromised, outdoor stages.[22]

Such deliberations on history, chronology, style and space are significant because many Dalit plays, including the ones discussed in this chapter, are shaped by these considerations. While all three plays – *Avarta, Kaifiyat* and *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi* – differ in their formal structure and composition, the manner in which they incorporate *tamasha* into their dramaturgy is dictated both by larger historiographical concerns around the representational politics of subaltern art and the pragmatics of staging and spectatorship.

II. Disappearance as Appropriation: Datta Bhagat's *Avarta*

Written and first published in a little magazine in 1976, *Avarta* ("Vortex") is one of Datta Bhagat's earliest and most critically acclaimed works.[23] Now extensively anthologized and translated into at least two languages,[24] this skillfully crafted one-act play established its playwright – then a professor of Marathi at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University in Aurangabad – as a distinctive voice in the emergent Dalit Theatre movement. The awards and praise bestowed on *Avarta* are primarily directed towards its inventive mobilization of the *tamasha* form; the play is frequently heralded as a paradigmatic example of how such folk forms can be used "in a new context, with a new meaning" by purposefully extricating them from "the mire of religious, ritualistic, casteist and orthodox associations" instead of uncritically adopting or reviving them

[22] Bhalchandra Phadke, "Prastavana" in *Dalit Rangabhoomi: Ekankikancha Sangraha* (Pune: Suresh Agency, 1982), n.p.
[23] This play was awarded the Natyadarpan award in 1977.
[24] It was translated into English by Eleanor Zelliot for publication and into Hindi by Vasant Deo for a performance. Both these translations are discussed in later sections.

through dramatic adaptation.[25] The scope and significance of the "new context and new meaning" signaled by *Avarta* is perhaps best illustrated through a cheekily self-reflexive exchange in the opening montage of the play. As first scene begins, the two narrators enter, swaying to the rhythm of the *tamasha* soundscape in the background, initiating their banter with an oft-cited verse by the 14th century saint-poet Chokhamela:

> Sutradhar: Johar, mai-baap, johar / I am the mahar of your mahars / I am come, starved for your leavings / The servant of your servants wails with hope / I have brought, says Chokha, my bowl for your leavings.[26]
>
> Songadya: Oh no no no no!
>
> Sutradhar: What? What's wrong?
>
> Songadya: Why are you bringing up this age-old stuff again?
>
> Sutradhar: It's not like that. The Johar is old, but its meaning is new.
>
> Songadya: I see! What's that?
>
> Sutradhar: The Johar is old, but its meaning is new.
>
> Songadya: Yes okay, I got that, but what's the new meaning?
>
> Sutradhar: Meaning? New meaning? How am I supposed to know? Nowadays they call it Dalit Literature.[27]

This allusive and oracular exchange (one of several such that bookend this play) encapsulates *Avarta*'s approach to the "age-old" folk form of the *tamasha*. Although *tamasha* is ostensibly evoked as a framing device in *Avarta,* it surfaces only through the gesture and allusion, and the form is never allowed to fully materialize on stage; it is always deferred. It is through this strategically unfulfilled

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[25] Avinash Dolas, "Adhyakshiya Bhashan," *Paach Adhyakshiya Bhashane* (Sugava Prakashan: 1995), 84.
[26] The address "Johar mai-baap, johar…" is one which "lower"/"untouchable" castes are expected to use to pay obeisance to, and as a salutation for their caste "superiors." The literal translation is perhaps something akin to "O Warrior!" The translation of this particular verse is drawn from *On the Threshold: Songs of Chokhamela*, translated by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press 2005), 68.
[27] Datta Bhagat, "Avarta," *Nivadak Ekankika* (Nanded: Abhay Prakashan, 2008), 60.

dramaturgy that *tamasha* takes on a "new meaning" – as a metonym and metaphor for enduring caste-based oppression and violence.

History and Genealogy

Despite its invocation of the "age-old stuff" at the beginning, *Avarta* unambiguously situates itself as a play about the present, with topical references to current events of 1970s, such as the state-imposed Emergency. Rooted in this contemporary perspective, the play launches back and forth into history, primarily through a retelling of the legend of the 17th century poet-saint Tukaram and his (fictional) son Manohar. In so doing, it interweaves episodes from various mythical, historical, literary and contemporary sociopolitical sources, ranging from stories from the *Ramayana*, verses of the 14th century poet-saint Chokhamela, to the anti-caste agitation led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The plot of the play primarily pivots around Manohar's transgressive plan to enter the Hindu temple forbidden to members of the so-called untouchable castes, to which Manohar (and his family) belongs. This attracts the ire of the villagers and the ruling chiefs, and Tukaram and Manohar are ultimately punished for their heresy. The story unfolds through a complete re-ordering of chronology; Manohar – who in the words of the caste elders of the village, has "come back from Pune and Mumbai having learnt all sorts of nonsense"[28] – is represented as being a disciple of Dr. Ambedkar, though historically, Tukaram and his kin existed approximately three centuries prior to Ambedkar's time. This confounding of temporalities is a deliberate device, for the play's investment lies not in tracing a chronologically ordered *history*, but in laying bare the *genealogy* of caste-based oppression. The institutionalized transformation and elimination of *tamasha* is one piece in this

[28] Ibid., 66.

puzzle; it is part of the systematized absenting, over centuries, of Dalit voices from public culture and memory.

In adopting this approach, *Avarta* undertakes what Joseph Roach designates as a "genealogy of performance," in the context of his spectacular expansive inquiry into the exchange and transfer of cultural practices over three centuries across the Atlantic: "Genealogies of performance document – and suspect – the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations;" they also "attend to 'counter-memories' or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences."[29] In a similar vein, albeit in a vastly different context, Bhagat's play intervenes in the dominant narrative of history by substituting the received wisdom about Tukaram – a figure beloved of middle-class Maharashtrians, symbolizing Maratha cultural pride, and generally associated with preaching religious and social equality – with a polemical account of his victimization at the hands of upper-caste authorities. It is a tale heavy with allegorical import, used to expose the long genealogy of caste-based violence, where Rama's unfair killing of the *shudra* (the lowest varna in the Hindu caste hierarchy) ascetic Shambhuka in the epic *Ramayana* is represented as part of a continuum of injustice that manifests across various religious, political, and social institutions. This episode from the *Ramayana* is enacted as a montage-within-the-play, wherein a narrator inhabits the role of Rama, and Manohar plays the part of Shambhuka. When a distraught Brahmin citizen barges into Rama's court bemoaning, "there must be some dreadful sin committed in the kingdom that has resulted in my young son's death," the burden of sin is placed on Shambhuka, absorbed in penance, a spiritual practice forbidden to *shudras.* Rama rectifies this violation by sentencing Shambhuka to death, thus restoring the hierarchical social order. Through the course of the play, we see this pattern

[29] Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 25-26.

of persecution recapitulated in pilgrimages, local kangaroo courts, town meetings, village councils, and democratic legal justice systems. In performative terms, this hegemonic reiteration is conveyed through literal embodiment: as one episode segues into the other, the same narrator (Songadya) plays Rama, he plays the Patil (village headman), he plays the Sarpanch (head of the village council), and he plays the judge in a modern court of law. Through this "constant state of again-ness"[30] the play performatively represents how in every scenario, since time immemorial, the final authority remains – ideologically and corporeally – in the same hands.

On the whole, as *Avarta* oscillates between mythic, folkloric, and contemporary timescapes, it evinces a deep investment in history; yet it is pointedly *not* a historical play. This distinction, and the dramatic instantiation of it, is a salient feature of Dalit Theatre in general, such that "history, in Dalit drama, is not simply a memorialization of the past, rather, it is called upon to bear witness to human civilization and human consciousness," and thus Dalit playwrights "do not eulogize the past, they interpret it, in order to analyze the present and confront the future."[31] In other words, while a majority of plays in this oeuvre, like *Avarta,* engage with history, they are not bound by fidelity to chronology or facticity as decreed within hegemonic archival records or public memory; theatre becomes a medium, as the epigraph to this chapter affirms, to rewrite and "make" history. In a conspicuous gesture of such history-making, Bhagat chooses to introduce a new fictional hero, Manohar, as his protagonist to champion the Dalit cause, rather than simply mobilizing an existing mythical or historical figure. This kind of "surrogation," in Roach's terms, becomes necessary because, as Bhagat effectively demonstrates throughout the play, the extant lower caste/Dalit heroes have been so thoroughly appropriated into the dominant discourse, and their revolutionary rhetoric

[30] Taylor suggests that one way to define performance is as a set of "reiterated corporeal behaviours" that is in a constant state of repetition. Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 26.
[31] Pantavane, "Prastavana," n.p.

has been rendered ineffectual for it is co-opted and often (mis)quoted to justify acts of caste oppression.[32] This is illustrated by the way the upper-caste authority figures in the play, like the Maharaj (the king), consistently invoke Chokhamela and Tukaram's verses to defend their actions, even in the midst of torturing Tukaram himself.[33] Much of the play's dramaturgical dexterity lies in its translation of the abstract concept of appropriation into a legible theatrical register; and while Manohar represents this idea, it is the two narrators who embody it on stage.

Circularity and Stillness

The two narrators, who we first encountered in the excerpt quoted at the opening of this section, occupy a liminal position, both presenting and participating in the revisionist narrative of the play. Significantly, the appellations with which they are identified, *songadya* and *sutradhar,* are stage titles rather proper names.[34] In the introduction to the original text of the play, Narhar Kurundkar, an eminent Marathi scholar and critic, reflects on the significance of these titles, designating the two figures as representing two entirely different styles of theatre. The *songadya,* as Kurundkar observes, is a stock character within *tamashas* and related genres, and the *sutradhar* belongs to the "*abhijat*" or

[32] Roach proposes the concept of "surrogation" as a means to understand the processes of substitution by which a culture "reproduces and recreates itself" as "actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of social relations that constitutes the social fabric." (2). For a fuller description and application of this concept, see Roach, *Cities.*

[33] Such appropriation is not a rhetorical invention on the playwright's part. Iravati Karve, in her ethnography of a Pandharpur pilgrimage, notes that the *dindi* of Brahmins routinely quoted verses from Chokhamela, without paying any attention to the social discrimination that Chokhamela protests against in his poetry. See Irawati Karve, "On the Road: A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1962): 13-29.

[34] In the published English translation of *Avarta,* the titles of the narrators have been rendered as "Stage-Manager" and "Jester" which, though semantically accurate, obfuscates the critical difference in register. For this, and instances of misappropriated dialogue and other inconsistencies, I have chosen to translate and quote directly from the Marathi original, though there is an English translation available.

classical (literally high caste or noble) theatre tradition. The juxtaposition of these two characters contributes to the self-reflexively hybrid aesthetic of *Avarta*: "The form of this one-act play has been assembled together by mixing some elements of conventional *vags* [*tamasha* plays] and some aspects of conventional *nataks* [proscenium plays]."[35] Although he does not elaborate what characteristics of *nataks* are manifest in *Avarta*, he does go into considerable detail about the selective incorporation of *tamasha* elements:

> *Vag*s usually begin with a *gan* [invocation] and a *gavani* [Radha-Krishna themed farce]. Of these, the playwright has omitted the *gan*. The *gavani* usually features Krishna, his companions, a *pendya* or *songadya*, one or two milkmaids and so on. Among these, only the *songadya* is present here…Within this kind of folk theatre, the characters in the play always oscillate between two different planes. With the announcement "let us travel fifty-sixty years backward," the play proceeds toward the *dindi*.[36]

(A *dindi* is a procession of pilgrims on their way to Pandharpur, the annual pilgrimage site for members of the *Varkari* sect. The *Varkari* tradition is part of the *Bhakti* movement within Hinduism, which worships Vithoba or Vitthal, an incarnation of Krishna).

As the above quote indicates, *Avarta* selectively employs some conventions from *tamasha*, while omitting others, such that each choice serves the overall ideological premise of the play. Thus the chronologically disparate, episodic nature of the plot has diegetic provenance as a standard device of "this kind of folk theatre." In a similar vein, the impetus for the elision of various *tamasha* conventions becomes patently clear in the initial banter between the two narrators. While engaged in dialogic commentary, the *songadya* suddenly assumes a posture of impatient anticipation, peeking into the wings, obviously waiting for something to happen:

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[35] Narhar Kurundkar, "Prastavana," *Ekanki Sangraha*, (Nanded: Sharada Prakashan, 1978), 11.
[36] Ibid., 12.

Sutradhar: Why do you keep looking over there again and again?

Songadya: I'm waiting.

Sutradhar: For whom?

Songadya: Who else? The invocation is over, then why haven't Radha and the milkmaids come as yet?

Sutradhar: Oh dear! You're really very behind!

Songadya: What do you mean 'behind'? Has Radha gone ahead already?

Sutradhar: No, not like that. Don't you know that these days there is a ban on the Radha Krishna scene?[37]

Of course, contrary to the Songadya's claim, the invocation is not "over" – it never even happened. The promise of the *gavani,* too, remains unfulfilled, for the much-awaited Radha and Krishna never appear. Through such suspended action, the play consistently invokes the *tamasha* form only to paradoxically demonstrate the impossibility of such a gesture, it "shows itself through the negative and through disappearance."[38] In *Avarta, tamasha* can only be referenced, never actually performed; because like many other aspects of Dalit sociopolitical and cultural life, this art form too has been subjugated, silenced and appropriated beyond representation. In spite of its absence – or because of it – the gentrification of the *tamasha* is presented as an irreversible process that leaves no scope for return:

Songadya: Yeshibai's tamasha has come to town!

Sutradhar: If it has come, let it come.

Songadya: It has slunk into the theatre.

Sutradhar: If it has slunk, let it slink.

Songadya: It has become *loknatya* [folk theatre]

Sutradhar: Let it be…what is wrong in that? […] What's wrong if *tamasha* becomes a little lady-like?

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[37] Bhagat, "Avarta," 69.

[38] Phelan, *Unmarked,* 19.

Songadya: Lady-like! Who could object to that? But then it's no longer a *tamasha*, it is a play! [*natak*][39]

The specific set of circumstances through which *tamasha* is upscaled into *loknatya* has been extensively described in preceding chapters. In fact, the reference to a "lady-like woman" as a metaphor for the process of gentrification seems like a direct allusion to the "inverted woman" metaphor developed by Vasant Sabnis to describe his *tamasha* revitalization model as dramatized in his play *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara*. This play, as we have seen in the last chapter, took the Marathi theatre scene by storm in 1965, and was still very much in production ten years later, at the time of Bhagat's writing of his one-act. Such topical intertextual references are interspersed throughout the text in *Avarta,* and foreground the urgency of its thematic and formal conceit. For instance, the binary between *tamasha* and *natak,* established in the dialogue excerpted above, is reinforced again in later scenes, through a somewhat opaque reference to *Ghashiram Kotwal*, a seminal play by Vijay Tendulkar that also draws on the *tamasha* form. Written and produced in 1972, this play follows the tragedy of the eponymous protagonist, a north-Indian Brahmin who rises to a position of power in the Peshwa regime in Maharashtra in the 18th century, only to ultimately come into conflict with and be defeated by Nana Phadnavis, the Chief Minister of the state. Discussing the accusations leveled against Tukaram by the upper-caste authorities, the *songadya* proclaims, "Tukaram will never be a Ghashiram."[40] Since this declaration, like so much of the narratorial banter in this play, is implicative, the meaning of this cryptic declaration is far from clear; however, when asked to elaborate, the *songadya* offers the converse example of the Shambuka episode (glossed above), remarking that most people believe that Rama killed Shambuka for his own good. The larger point

[39] Ibid., 32.
[40] Ibid, 74.

being made here is that unlike Ghashiram, Tukaram cannot be a tragic figure, for his victimization occurs not through oppositional conflict, but through co-option and violence that always masquerades as benevolence.[41]

In a sense, this cursory exchange between the narrators animates the central provocation of *Avarta*, namely, that appropriation is the most inimical, and some ways, the most stultifying form of hegemonic violence, because it leaves no scope for direct confrontation or retaliation. This paralyzing effect on the *tamasha* form – whereby it is not allowed to come to fruition – is epitomized in the sense of physical confinement that the two narrators experience within the dramatic apparatus of which they are part. They attempt to "begin telling the story" but cannot do so because they find themselves, quite literally, trapped. They "cannot go forward, because they cannot cross the row of lights" [at the front of the stage] and they "cannot go backward because they cannot cross the back curtain" and are thus compelled to "spin round and round" in the same spot.[42] This image of continuous circular movement recurs throughout and embodies the fundamental verbal, visual and ideological trope of the play, as is evoked in the very title: "*Avarta*" which translates to "vortex" (or "whirlpool' in some translations). The same image of circularity is invoked by Manohar in his fiery final speech towards the end of the play, just before both he and his father are killed in an "accident." Manohar's monologue exposes the cyclical, generational pattern of caste-based violence

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[41] Tendulkar's use of *tamasha* and other forms in this play has been cited as a representative case of cultural appropriation. Premanand Gajvi, for instance, remarks in a speech that "Many people say that the Brahmins class have stolen all of our art forms. But it is important to remember that it is not just that they have stolen it, they have extracted the essence out of the art, and with great effort, have forged artistic creations like *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Mahanirvan*." Gajvi, "Adhyaskshiya," 62. *Mahanirvan* ("The Dread Departure," 1973) is a black comedy penned by the eminent Marathi playwright Satish Alekar, which, like *Ghashiram Kotwal,* incorporates formal elements from several different popular and "folk" traditions. It is worth noting, though, that both these plays satirize and critique Brahminism and oppressive social orthodoxy. See Vijay Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1984) and Satish Alekar, *The Dread Departure = Mahanirvan* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989).
[42] Bhagat, "Avarta," 61-62.

and domination. "I am that sinner Shambukha who crossed the boundaries of your Aryan religion" he declares, "I am that Chokhamela whose buried bones cry out for the Lord," he adds. "I am the one [Ambedkar] who openly challenges the Father of the Nation [Gandhi]." The only possible means for this ceaseless oppression to end, Manohar proclaims, would to be break this circularity once and for all. "I want this spinning-top like movement to stop" he exhorts. "I want to end this turning of circles. If this is a crime, then so be it. I am a spinning top. A top! A top that spins endlessly, ceaselessly in the same spot!"[43]

Through this image, the play poetically translates the pervasive and perpetual impediments to caste-based social mobility into a poignant metaphor of movement; the aspiration here is to transcend the condition of perennial circular motion, towards being "still and still moving" – to quote T.S. Eliot's rather eloquent phrase.[44] Within the framework of the play, such a subversion seems impossible, for as the action comes to a close, the two narrators once again reiterate the impossibility of moving either forwards or backwards, and begin to actually weave in circles on stage, thereby visually epitomizing the metaphor of continuous circularity that has haunted the play throughout:

> Songadya: Don't want to stay here.
> Sutradhar: Don't want to stay here.
> Songadya: Want to go backwards.
> Sutradhar: Want to go backwards.
> Songadya: Want to go forward.
> Sutradhar: Want to go forward.
> Songadya: Can't go back, can't go forward
> Sutradhar: Can't go back, can't go forward

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[43] Ibid., 82.
[44] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 32.

Songadya: Must go round and round, yes, go round and round

Sutradhar: Must go round and round, yes, weave in circles

Songadya: Must weave in circles, yes, weave in circles.

(*As they weave in circles, the curtain falls*).[45]

The irony at the heart of the play is that while the pattern of subjugation is cyclical, the damage is irreversible; there is no scope for return or revival, as signaled (or rather, not signaled) by the longed-for *tamasha* that can never be materialized into existence, but forever haunts this performance.

Reception and Re-enactments

In performance, the circular structure of *Avarta* is reinforced and complicated by the fact that the rhythms of theatre too are cyclical, in that it subsists through repetition, where the same show is performed over and over. One is compelled to ask, does this looming prospect of recurrence, so fundamental to the very act of performance, further intensify the sense of inevitability built into the play? If "turning in circles" is the shape of the problem itself (through the historical recurrence of subjugation), would a circular method of diagnosing and exposing the problem (through retellings) within a form that is also inherently governed by a cyclical repetitive logic, have the potential to be subversive and effect a radical break in the pattern, or would it perpetuate it? Furthermore, what kind of impact does Bhagat's strategically unfulfilled dramaturgy, that seeks to visibilize absence, have in embodied performance? Dispatches from the reception history of this play do not exactly answer these questions, but they do offer insights in related directions.

[45] Bhagat, "Avarta," 64.

It is difficult to trace an exact production history of *Avarta,* but one of its early landmark performances was a production staged by the group Dalit Theatres at the third *Dalit Sahitya Sammelan* (Dalit Literature Conference) in 1977, which was widely appreciated, even by the author himself;[46] it has since been performed in a number of contexts and formats, including in standard proscenium theatres, in open playgrounds, on street corners, and in the round, with crowds of spectators on all four sides.[47] Along with *Wata Palwata* ("Routes and Escape Routes, 1987), *Avarta* is also one of Bhagat's most widely anthologized plays, incorporated into the undergraduate Marathi curriculum, and included, in translation, in an anthology of "Modern Indian Drama" published by the state's Literature Division in 2000. Despite this popular and critical appeal, the play did not quite achieve the impact intended in performance, primarily on account of its formal experimentation; as the playwright himself observes, "rural audiences could not relate to the use of these forms in a modern stage setting."[48] In fact, working class Dalit spectators, in particular, were rather uninterested in the play because of its historiographical focus and folkish form, protesting that they "did not want anything old."[49] The irony, of course, is that *Avarta* starts with a disclaimer precisely to this effect, insisting that though it may manifest as old, "its meaning is new;" these opening lines, it would seem, were not sufficient to allay the weariness expressed by Dalit working class audiences.

Hindi adaptations of *Avarta* appear to have garnered more a positive audience response. Most notably, one such adaptation was staged by one of Bombay's foremost experimental groups, Theatre Unit, in 1984, directed by Nandita Aras and translated by Vasant Deo, in the city's most

[46] Shivaji Narsingrao, "Datta Bhagat Yanchya Sahitya Krutincha Chikitsak Abhyas" (PhD diss., Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, 2003), 612.
[47] Ibid., 588.
[48] Quoted in Ashok Gopal, "'Dalit', Dalits and a Dalit Playwright in the Terrain of Labels," *Guftugu,* August 2017, guftugu.in/2017/08/22/dalit-dalits-and-a-dalit-playwright-in-the-terrain-of-labels-ashok-gopal/.
[49] Dolas, "Adhyakshiya," 80.

vibrant experimental venue, the Chhabildas school hall. However, its positive reception by urban, educated audiences in this context was likely because of its seemingly familiar form; the "hybrid" play had become a mainstay of experimental stages by the 1980s, and *Avarta* could be generically assimilated into that movement, in spite of the sharp critique of this "urban folk" fad being written into the play text itself. In Bhagat's estimation, "urban audiences viewed [the play's form and setting] as exotica."[50] When received as such, the thematic import of the play also seemed to shift, narrativized now as a universal story about equality and injustice, rather than a pointed, contextual commentary on caste-based oppression. A listing in the *Times of India* newspaper for the Hindi adaptation published in 1984, for instance, reads as follows: "Theatre Unit presents Datta Bhagat's original play on the struggle of the masses to assert their rights."[51] Another contemporaneous listing summarizes the play: "Depicts the working people's struggles but ends pessimistically."[52] Such one-liners are, of course, subject to the vagaries of the contemporary media zeitgeist and the pragmatics of newsprint, and might have little to do with the actual intention, perception and reception of *Avarta* in adaptation. However, it is conspicuous that there is no direct mention of caste in these listings, given that it is the primary (and only) subject of the play. Not to make too fine a point of these stray textual ephemera, but by publicizing this professedly Dalit play without any mention of Dalits or caste, these archival remnants ironically seem to be re-enacting precisely the kind of effacing logic that Bhagat so forcefully condemns in *Avarta,* powerfully metaphorized by his elliptical invocation of *tamasha* as a formal and thematic framework for the play.

While *Avarta* broaches the destruction of *tamasha* metonymically, it is addressed more directly and literally in the next play discussed in this chapter, Rustum Achalkhamb's *Kaifiyat* (1981).

[50] Gopal, "Dalit."
[51] "Theatre," *The Times of India,* 7 December 1984, p. 3.
[52] "Theatre," *The Times of India,* 9 November 1984, p. 3.

Incidentally, both these plays have been retrospectively categorized by critics as plays "written by Dalits for non-Dalit audiences."[53] With *Avarta*, this characterization appears to have been, at least in part, influenced by its reception history, but with *Kaifiyat*, the intended target of address is unambiguously written into the play itself.

II. Disappearance as Destruction: Rustum Achalkhamb's *Kaifiyat*

The title of the play *Kaifiyat* ("An Account")[54] effectively captures the tenor and structure of this work: an assemblage of ideologically congruent, discrete episodic events strung together, that collectively testify to the systemic persecution of Dalits over centuries. Written, published and first performed in 1981, *Kaifiyat* synthesizes Rustum Achalkhamb's long-standing academic and artistic commitment to Dalit cultural production. As a professor of theatre and performance, Achalkhamb's scholarship centered on Dalit art forms; his doctoral research culminated in an authoritative monograph on *tamasha*, (*Tamasha Lokarangabhumi*, 2006), which traces the origins, historical development, and contemporary context of this performance art.[55] In addition, he was also a prolific actor and director, and founder of "Dalit Natya Akademi," an Aurangabad-based theatre group. The impetus for his first play, *Kaifiyat,* stemmed from these intellectual and experiential investments:

> I felt strongly that the suffering of *tamasha* artists and common Dalit folk needed to be broadcast somehow. I wanted to capture the anguish of Dalits and Dalit artists using their own artistic *medium* [that is, *tamasha*] and to present this narrative before the public by staging it in the *form* of a play. That's how *Kaifiyat* was born."[56]

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[53] Dolas, "Adhyakshiya," 79.
[54] "*Kaifiyat* is a Perso-Arabic word that has many connotations meaning "quality, nature, condition; account, details, particulars; state of affairs, situation." R.S. McGregor "Kaipaiyata [कैफ़ियत]." *The Oxford Hindi-English dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
[55] Rustum Achalkhamb, *Tamasha Lokrangbhumi* (Pune: Sugava Prakashan, 2006).
[56] Rustum Achalkhamb, *Kaifiyat* (Kolhapur: Prachar Prakashan, 1982).

The distinction that Achalkhamb draws between "medium" and "form" is fundamental to the architectonics of the play; for though *Kaifiyat's* framing plot prominently features a *tamasha*, it is not formally structured like a *tamasha*. It uses *tamasha* as a "medium" in almost the etymological sense of the word: as an intermediary or mediating force. As the play begins, the setting is that of a "village fair:"

> (*Stage Direction: As per the usual convention, this year too, a tamasha theatre has travelled here. The curtain rises, there is no one on stage. After a few moments, there are some murmurs among the audience members. One of them shouts.*)
>
> First one: Hey come on, are you going to start the show or not? What are you up to? What a mess!
>
> Second one: Yeah yeah, this not some free prayer service that you can start whenever you feel like. I've paid one and half rupees for my ticket (*fishes out the ticket from his pocket*) See? (*Other people start yelling along with him too*) Hey come on! Start the show now or else…![57]

From the outset, there is a diegetic, upper/middle-caste audience written into the play, and it is this audience that watches the *tamasha* in the village fair. As readers/spectators of *Kaifiyat,* we are at a degree of remove from the action, insofar as we watch the diegetic audience watching. At the same time, the "real" audience of the play is interpellated alongside the fictive one, primarily through the numerous direct addresses that suture the episodic plot into a narrative whole. These are delivered by the protagonist, the Shahir, who acts as the narrator, providing commentary to contextualize and connect the nine disparate scenes of the play, each centered on a different legendary/historical icon from the Dalit canon. The artist-audience relationship functions as a metonym for caste-based conflict, which becomes the central theatrical and meta-theatrical dramatic conflict of the play as a whole.

[57] Ibid., 1.

Memorialization and Historiography

By the time the Shahir makes his first appearance on stage, he finds himself confronted with an increasingly hostile and restive audience, who, having been made to wait for the show to start, now have no patience for his oratory. He attempts to begin the show with the usual niceties, thanking the assembled "connoisseurs" for their patronage and expressing his gratitude, but is abruptly interrupted:

> Second one: Yes yes all that is okay. We know this stuff already. But what about our Sundara? Is she here today or not? We've come here only to see her.[58]

"Sundara," we are meant to understand, is the *lavani* dancer in the *tamasha* troupe. In declaring their exclusive interest in her, these spectators reveal themselves to be the kind of decadent and dissolute patrons who Gajvi holds responsible for the degeneration of *tamasha* into a form of sexual servitude; they are not interested in art, and are certainly not "connoisseurs." Their expectations are undermined with the Shahir's announcement that Sundara will not, in fact, be making an appearance; because "today's show is not about song and dance, it's about sharing a few stories, expressing a point-of-view, about presenting a certain reality, an account."[59] The play then goes on to offer this narrative, or *kaifiyat,* in the form of an episodic genealogy, tracing lineages of persecution. The genealogy traced in *Kaifiyat* is not so much cyclical (as in *Avarta*) as it is generational, demonstrating how "every generation has been bound in the chains of slavery," including the Shahir himself, his father, and other, public historical figures, including Chokhamela, the saint-poet, Amrutnak and Sidnak, both Mahar martial heroes in the Deccani Muslim and

[58] Ibid., 2.
[59] Ibid., 2.

Maratha courts respectively, Vithu Mahar, a legendary symbol of subaltern generosity, and of course Ambedkar.

These episodes are not fictional per se; they are more akin to dramatizations of the Dalit historiographical canon. Since these stories and figures are drawn from popular discourse,[60] there is little exposition, and most scenes seem to begin *in medias res,* with the Shahir providing some introductory gloss, usually in verse form. All of them largely follow the same dramaturgical arc: they testify to the unreciprocated compassion and integrity of the Dalit heroes, which are inevitably met with injustice and oppression. The first episode, for instance, centers on Chokhamela, summoned into the narrative by the Shahir as his figurative forefather: "Now watch! My father's father, Chokha Mahar."[61] Over the next two scenes, we watch as Chokhamela, a revered devotee of the god Vitthal, languishes at the steps of the temple, forbidden to enter. Overcome with spiritual fervor, and in the throes of poetic ecstasy, Chokha oversteps, clutches the feet of the idol. He is swiftly captured, accused of desecrating the deity, and falsely framed for theft. Unsurprisingly, the upper-caste village council finds him guilty, and sentences him to a harsh punishment: being yoked to an ox and trampled underfoot.

Chokhamela's demeanor through this ordeal is rather docile, immersed as he is in rapture of the divine. The dialogue Achalkhamb assigns to this character are interspersed with Chokhamela's most famous verses. Notably, the lines cited at the opening of *Avarta* – "Johar, mai-baap, johar / I am the mahar of your mahars" – are invoked here too; however, in *Kaifiyat*, they do not carry any

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[60] In addition to Chokhamela, who has been written about extensively by scholars like Eleanor Zelliot (see below), Amrutnak, Sidnak and Vithu Mahar are symbols of Mahar martial pride and have been memorialized within popular discourse as such. Philip Constable investigates the legendary status of all three figures in his essay "The Marginalization of a Dalit Martial Race in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Western India," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2001): 439-78.
[61] Achalkhamb, *Kaifiyat,* 3.

"new meaning." The Johar is old, and so is the meaning. It is offered as an utterance of obeisance, and is received as such. In a similar vein, we don't see any of the other historical characters in the play (other than Ambedkar) transcend or transform their circumstances; they are all depicted as exceptional personalities who are shackled and subjugated by relentless caste-based violence. Thus Amrutnak, a warrior, is portrayed as singular in his loyalty to the king (or Sultan), exemplified by his valiant rescue of the kidnapped queen. Foreseeing that the brahmin ministers would accuse him of sexual crimes, he voluntarily castrates himself and presents the Sultan with a box containing evidence of his sacrifice. So too with Sidnak, a warrior in the Maratha court, who is heralded as an indomitably brave soldier, but is mistreated and maligned by the rest of his army.

Such representations bear a complicated relation to existing Dalit revisionist historiography; Achalkhamb's commitment to exposing "the history of slavery" through these portrayals can (and does) gloss over the contentious position some of these figures occupy within Ambedkarite discourse. To return to the Chokhamela episode, for example, the present-day legacy of this "untouchable" poet-saint is highly contested. Although this figure played an important symbolic role in the early Mahar movement (in the early twentieth century), he is, as Eleanor Zelliot puts it, "no longer an effective model for Dalits in Maharashtra."[62] This disavowal primarily follows from the wholesale rejection of Hinduism and Hindu gods and saints in the tide of Ambedkarite conversion to Buddhism. Chokhamela's poetry and positionality make him especially unsuitable as a heroic figure, particularly his unquestioning acceptance of the *karma* theory of rebirth, which mandates that one's current caste status accrues from sins committed in past lives. In the few instances that Chokhamela is mobilized as a Dalit icon within contemporary literature, the attitude is one of "awareness […] not devotion," where the untouchable saint's suffering becomes grounds for an

[62] Eleanor Zelliot, "Sant Sahitya and its Effect on Dalit Movements," in *Intersections: Socio-cultural Trends in Maharashtra*, ed. Meera Kosambi (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 187.

indictment of Hinduism. Zelliot cites Daya Pawar's poem *Payri* ("The Step," 1991) as one such usage:

> O Lord of Pandhari, why is Chokha outside the temple?
> You are really the false one, you're the one who showed him his place…[63]

Given this checkered legacy, what do we make of *Kaifiyat's* evocation of Chokhamela? In a sense, this is a larger question about the aesthetic and political efficacy of reviving and representing disputed cultural inheritances; the *Kaifiyat* example provides a localized, distilled view of what is a universal, abstract problem. What method or strategy is best suited, especially within a creative register, to represent the mobilization of superseded symbolic tokens while also gesturing at the limits of such representation?

This remains an unresolved issue in *Kaifiyat*, for Chokhamela's travails, as we have seen, are dramatized at length over two scenes, and offered without any substantial narratorial commentary or intervention. The Shahir simply concludes the episode by declaring to the audience, "So! This is how that great devotee of Panduranga was trampled underfoot by you."[64] When viewed as part of the larger dramatic arc of the play, it would seem Achalkhamb intends to invoke Chokhamela much like Daya Pawar does; as providing context and backdrop for Ambedkarite agitation. Chokhamela's son, Karmamela – another saint-poet, often considered to be a more radical voice than his father[65] – even makes an appearance at the end of the episode, proclaiming (to himself) that "there needs to be a revolution."[66] However, the protracted span of the play, and the sheer number of incidents and characters that separate the Chokhamela chapter from the final scene where the revolution finally

[63] Zelliot, "Sant Sahitya," 191.
[64] Achalkhamb, *Kaifiyat*, 10.
[65] Zelliot, "Sant Sahitya," 190.
[66] Achalkhamb, *Kaifiyat*, 10.

gets underway under the leadership of Ambedkar, make it difficult to locate any kind of subversive potential or radical caste consciousness in these early, tragic chronicles. Pantavane's critique of *Kaifiyat* is directed at this very problem, arguing that that spiritual resistance and sociopolitical resistance are completely different phenomena, and must be represented as such. To equate Karmamela's personal convictions to Ambedkar's political vision, Pantavane adds, "is nothing short of absurd."[67]

Not all figures and icons memorialized in the play are as controversial as Chokhamela and his son. However, most episodes are similarly prolonged and bear little ideological relation to one other, even though they are presented as one composite *kaifiyat* or account. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into each scene of the play; however, it is worth pointing out that taken as a whole, the first eight scenes of *Kaifiyat* portray oppression but not resistance. It is only with the invocation of Ambedkar, in the final scene of the play, that any kind of resistance comes into view. Incidentally, Ambedkar himself does not appear in the play as a character, but his legacy is first conjured through a praise poem, performed by the Shahir, and in the scenes that follow, Ambedkar's speeches and exhortations are paraphrased by others. Inspired by Ambedkar's call to action, and under his unseen leadership, the gathering of protestors collectively engages in the hitherto proscribed act of sipping water from the common village well. Like in *Avarta*, the climactic act of revolution in *Kaifiyat* also centers on temple entry, and here too the scheme remains unrealized; when rumors about the Dalit protestors' proposed plan to enter the local temple begin to spread, the enraged upper-caste authorities orchestrate a vicious attack on the peaceful Dalit congregation, thus bringing this final episode to a close. The play concludes, as it began, with a long monologue delivered by the Shahir, addressed to the audience. And while each episode in the play

[67] Pantavane, "Prastavana," n.p.

stages various scenarios of caste-based confrontations, the primary dramatic conflict of *Kaifiyat* arises from the oppositional dynamic between the narrator and the audience.

Refusal to Disappear

Right from the outset, the relationship between the narrator and the diegetic audience is framed as antagonistic. The tone of this rapport is established in the very first lines of the play, when the impatient spectators heckle the absent Shahir, goading him to start the show. Like every other confrontation in *Kaifiyat*, this one too is fundamentally a caste-based conflict. The audience is clearly signaled to be composed of upper-caste patrons, while the Shahir identifies himself as a Dalit artist who is structurally beholden to their patronage for his livelihood. As the Shahir pithily remarks to the enraged spectators, "Your forbearance and my stomach are very closely related."[68] This unequal artist-audience relationship, therefore, becomes a synonym for unequal caste relations. This already tense dynamic becomes all the more volatile when the Shahir refuses to fulfil his caste-based occupation – that is, to put up a titillating *tamasha* to entertain the upper-class audience – and starts staging a revolutionary invective instead. The Shahir's initial assurances that "Sundara's song and dance [that is, the erotic *lavani* performance] will surely happen," are not borne out in practice. In fact, the *tamasha* that the audience has gathered to watch never even begins; as we have seen, an account or *kaifiyat* is offered in its stead.

The Shahir's refusal to perform may be read as a subversive political act, one that has parallels and corollaries in various other minoritarian contexts, that similarly emerge from "instances of racialized exhaustion." As a form of political performance, such "aesthetics of refusal," as Lilian

[68] Achalkhamb, *Kaifiyat,* 1.

Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan argue, call attention to "those forms of relation that challenge the discursive infrastructure that makes political action legible, that renders minoritarian bodies as such, and that reiterates dominant norms about the place and time for political recognition."[69] In refusing to perform as expected within the network of hegemonic artist-audience relations, the Shahir, in effect, "refuses to reproduce the relations of exchange and spectatorship that performance is assumed to facilitate."[70] The rationale for such refusal is written into the text, albeit within a slightly different context. In the final scene of the play, as the congregation of Dalit protestors commence their rally to the village well, the leader of the group raises a slogan: "We vow to follow Bhimrao's [Ambedkar's] decree…from now on, we will no longer do any demeaning work… our humanity will not be commodified anymore."[71] In other words, the Shahir's refusal, and insistent presence and reappearance through the play is not a personal, capricious act, but is part of a collective, ideological repudiation, "a refusal to disappear."[72]

The tragedy manifest in *Kaifiyat* is that this strategy of resistance, too, is only rewarded with further violence and torment. Awaiting the promised, but consistently deferred, arrival of Sundara, the diegetic audience are compelled to sit through scene after scene of testimony attesting to the atrocities of caste-based persecution. The Shahir's final monologue shifts register into the contemporary political scenario, demanding reparations, and implicates the audience in no uncertain terms: "Yes yes, you. I'm talking to you!" he declares.[73] Rhetorically, this "you" is addressed to the audience *in* the play, as well as the audience *of* the play. The audience of the play are now compelled

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[69] Lilian G. Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan, "Introduction to Performing Refusal/Refusing to Perform", *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 29, no. 1 (2019): 3.
[70] Ibid., 5.
[71] Achalkhamb, *Kaifiyat,* 30-31.
[72] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 39.
[73] Achalkhamb, *Kaifiyat,* 37.

to watch as the Shahir and his troupe of actors (who have been playing various roles in the episodes) continue their rebellion, and as the diegetic audience in the play become increasingly unruly, and transform, almost organically, into a riotous mob, literally incinerating the art and artists that no longer serve them:

> First one: You, you, motherf…Are you going to stop all this or not? Where's the dance? Where is Sundara?
>
> Shahir: There's no Sundara today, nor her dance. And we are not going to stop all this either. (*There is commotion among the audience*)
>
> Second one: These people don't understand any other language. Come on. (*They run onto the stage. They assemble the Shahir and his companions in the middle of stage and attack them. Uproar.*)
>
> First one: (*Suddenly has a monstrous idea*) C'mon, let's set the theatre on fire.
>
> Shahir: Stop! Don't be so reckless. You've already burnt our houses. Burnt our people. And today you're setting fire to our art too. Stop.
>
> Second one: No way. C'mon, let's set it on fire. (*They burn down the theatre. Pandemonium.*)[74]

Once the fire is lit, the play ends. This oversaturated image of a theatre in flames naturally invites metaphorical interpretation; in the spectacular history of conflagration that illumines so much early modern English drama, for instance, the trope of the "burning theatre" is deployed as an expression of antitheatrical sentiment. In such accounts, the burning of the theatre – whether real or fantastical – signals that the immoral and dangerous phenomenon of theatricality is slated for divine destruction.[75] In *Kaifiyat*, however, the final fire is not eschatological; the destruction promises neither justice nor deliverance. Rather, it is a profoundly profane fire, yet another instance of quotidian violence that follows from generations of systematic, structural oppression. The

[74] Ibid., 38.

[75] Ellen MacKay, *Persecution, Plague, and Fire: Fugitive Histories of the Stage in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

hegemonic erasure of subaltern cultural production, which is poetically metaphorized in *Avarta* as immobility, is literalized here as physical cremation of the art and the artists.

Within the world of the play, the burning *tamasha* theatre signals the end of subaltern art; yet, in a broader sense, this end is at least "symbolically postponed" as it is being repeated through the continuous performance of the play *Kaifiyat*.[76] Of course, there is no real fire on stage when the play is staged. At the same time, the audience of the play is called upon to witness the simulated act of arson unfold, and behold the transformation of the fictive audience into a violent mob. The climax of *Kaifiyat*, thus, makes spectators into bystanders, and through its numerous second-person direct addresses, implicates them in the action. In so doing, the play also reflects the very real and very contemporary phenomenon of both upper-caste/class disinterest in and outrage at the politicization of *tamasha*. As we have seen in Chapter 1, when this conventionally entertainment-oriented form becomes radicalized and becomes a tool for political mobilization of minoritarian communities (instead of a form of recreation for upper-caste patrons) it is systematically repressed and categorized as politically and aesthetically inadequate. Such resonance with reality is not accidental, and in fact, in the introductory note to the play, Achalkhamb explains that he wrote *Kaifiyat* in response to actual events. Specifically, he cites various incidents of mistreatment of *tamasha* artists, such as the *tamasha* maestro Dadu Indurikar. Once while on tour with his *tamasha* troupe, he had to delay a performance on account of a power cut. The incensed assembled mob responded by burning down his tent and all his properties. A similar incident occurred with the famed *tamasha* duo Kalu-Balu, when they were unexpectedly delayed in reaching a performance. Upon arrival, they found their sets and properties destroyed. This background is not manifest in *Kaifiyat* as such of course, but

[76] Freddie Rokem extensively discusses the efficacy of such postponement and the ethical implications of spectatorial witnessing, albeit in a different context, in *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 47.

according to one critical evaluation, the play's "realistic portrayal of the resistance mounted by Dalits against the injustice committed against them…becomes more effective because it has a basis in reality."[77] Reality, as per this account, is what lends a sense of credibility and performative power to Rustum Achalkhamb's *Kaifiyat*. This is a marked contrast from the final play we turn to in this chapter, Yogiraj Waghmare's *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi,* which interrogates and challenges the very idea of reality itself.

IV. Disappearance as Disavowal: Yogiraj Waghmare's *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi*

Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi ("That Which Never Happened") is a short, and remarkably prescient one-act play written by Yogiraj Waghmare, a prominent litterateur and retired schoolteacher. Although Waghmare's known primarily known for his short stories, novels and children's books, he has penned at least five one-acts in his long literary career, most of which have been published in various literary periodicals in the period between 1974-2010.[78] *Age Je Ghadalechi Nahi* (henceforth shortened to *Aga Je*) was first published in the literary journal *Asmitadarsha* in 1978, and is his only play to be anthologized; it is included in a landmark collection of Dalit one-act plays published in 1982, which incidentally, also features Datta Bhagat's *Avarta*.[79] As a result, *Aga Je* remains Waghmare's most notable dramatic work, though there is little record of its performance or reception history.[80]

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[77] Vidya Pralhad Jadhav, "Rustum Achalkhamb Yancha Samagra Sahityacha Abhyas," (PhD Diss, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, 2012), 112.

[78] *Mrutatme* was published in *Aapla Maharashtra Diwali Ank* in 1974; *Baarav* was published in *Asmitadarsha* in 2000; *Madhyast* in *Mandesh Vaibhav Diwali Ank in* 2010; *Shishtmandal* remains unpublished. Bhagwan Limbaaji Bhalekar, "Yogiraj Waghmare Yanchya Sahityatil Dalit Vishwa: Ek Abhyas," (PhD Diss, Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, 2018), 277-280.

[79] Bhalchandra Phadke, ed, *Dalit Rangabhoomi: Ekankikancha Sangraha* (Pune: Suresh Agency, 1982).

[80] There are three PhD dissertations in Marathi dedicated to Yogiraj Waghmare's oeuvre, and all

Unlike the two plays discussed above, *Aga Je* does not evoke the framework of a *tamasha* as such, nor does it expressly deploy any *tamasha* conventions in its characters and/or settings. At the same time, the play announces itself as a *vag* – or the dramatic skit that is usually associated with *tamasha* performance – right at the outset. As the play opens, the *sutradhar*, or narrator, introduces the show, directly addressing the audience:

> Sutradhar: Greetings, all! You have gathered to watch a *vag,* also known as *loknatya.* Your presence is proof that you are all great connoisseurs of art.[81]

As the previous example of *Kaifiyat* attests, this salutation is somewhat formulaic, but in *Aga Je,* such a declarative preface becomes necessary because there is little else in the play to indicate that it is supposed to be a *vag,* as the narrator himself goes on to point out:

> Sutradhar: There no milkmaids prancing about here, waiting to enter after me. *I am sorry.* You will ask, how can it be a real *vag* without milkmaids and dancing girls? But I am of the firm opinion that you can indeed perform a *vag* without any dancers and milkmaids. This *vag* doesn't have any Radha-Krishna scenes either. But in spite all of this, we're putting up a good show for you.[82]

Unlike in *Avarta,* where these stock *tamasha* scenes and characters are unable to appear because they have been censored and/or appropriated beyond reprieve, in *Aga Je,* they are deliberately omitted. The reason for this elision, according to one scholarly account, is because the playwright "does not seek to entertain the public, but to showcase the injustice atrocities committed against Dalits by *savarnas* ("upper" castes). To that end, the play takes up a new form and a new subject in its dramaturgy."[83] While Waghmare's intervention at the level of form in this play is not exactly new, in

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three have a chapter dedicated to his dramatic work, but none of these theses make any mention of the performance or reception history of *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi.*

[81] Yogiraj Waghmare, "Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi," in *Dalit Rangabhoomi: Ekankikancha Sangraha,* ed. Bhalchandra Phadke (Pune: Suresh Agency, 1982), 86.

[82] Ibid., 86

[83] Balasaheb Shankar Shelke, "Yogiraj Waghmare: Vyakti ani Vangmay: Ek Chikitsak Abhyas" (PhD

that there is a long legacy of such redaction within Dalit performance history, his handling of subject and theme is both staunchly contemporary and dexterously allegorical; and in that sense, it is both new and timeless.

New subject, old subjects

The familiar scene of the narrator commencing the play with direct address and meta-commentary is a theatrical device that recurs in virtually every play discussed in this dissertation. However, what is distinctive about *Aga Je,* is that the narrator figure, the Sutradhar, does not occupy a liminal position in relation to the dramatic action of the play. In fact, after his little introductory spiel, he does not reappear at all. The Sutradhar's vision of his own role is unusual, and in a sense, quite capacious:

> Sutradhar: I'm the *sutradhar*. The one who comes before the start of the *vag* to have a chat with you all. In a real sense, the leader of any action can be called a *sutradhar*. Like the *sutradhar* of a plot. No no, by 'plot' I don't mean an abduction or a murder. A revolutionary who overthrows a state is also a *sutradhar*.[84]

In keeping with this "revolutionary" conceit, he goes on the describe the forthcoming "plot" as a "a protest – an agitation," declaring, "I am the *sutradhar* of this protest, what do you say to that!" After this somewhat facetious proclamation, the mood and milieu of the action shifts dramatically.

As the actual plot unfolds, we are transported to a quasi-mythic setting of the court of Maharaja Indrasen, a naive and narcissistic king, who is easily swayed by the advice of his upper-caste ministers and advisers. The first few exchanges between the newly appointed king and his courtiers demonstrate Maharaja Indrasen's obsession with creating a positive public image of himself among his subjects, primarily through media reportage. His Chief Minister or Pradhan*,* the most

Diss, University of Pune, 2008), 378.
[84] Waghmare, "Aga Je," 86.

scheming character in the play, constantly raises celebratory chants ("Long live the king!") and plies him with laudatory news headlines and radio broadcasts, claiming that they represent popular public sentiment, and counsels the king to solicit favorable press coverage. These montages are deliberately anachronistic, in that the seemingly mythic kingdom is equipped with modern media machinery conventionally associated with the democratic nation-state, such as "the *Times*" newspaper and All India Radio transmission. Such temporal incongruity is standard within the *vag* genre, and in *Aga Je,* it effectively establishes the ageless allegorical import of the plot.

As part of his self-aggrandizing agenda, Maharaja Indrasen decrees a royal celebration to commemorate his coronation. The "Cultural Minister," who oversees this event, commissions a Shahir, or balladeer to perform a paean to the king. The Shahir and his troupe present a rousing song venerating the kingdom, its geographical expanse and topographical diversity, its content and peaceful populace, and the prosperity and harmony that reigns in the land. The king is duly impressed, and as is his wont, goads the Shahir into accepting his capricious patronage, egged on by the Pradhan:

> Maharaja: I am very pleased with your song. I feel your presence at this royal coronation is auspicious. You have awoken my munificence. Ask for whatever your heart desires! I am the king of this land. So go ahead, ask for anything you want!
>
> Shahir: I…I…
>
> Maharaja: Don't be scared. What do you say, Pradhan-ji? Just because I've become the king, does it mean I've turned into a lion? I am just like you, a *common* man.
>
> Pradhan: Of course!
>
> Shahir: No thank you, Maharaj.
>
> Maharaja: What is this madness! I must give you something, no matter what! I will give you one lakh rupees.
>
> Shahir: What will I do with money?
>
> Maharaja: Okay then, gold? Jewelry? A joyride on a plane?
>
> Shahir: No no, nothing, really!

Maharaja: Okay then what do you want, tell me! Some land in each one's name?

Shahir: We don't have such wants. We belong to the shahir caste. Entertaining people with songs is our occupation.[85]

Although it is never explicitly stated as such, the Shahir, whose caste-based occupation is to entertain, functions as "a representative of the Dalit community."[86] This parallel becomes increasingly evident as the allegorical import of the play becomes more clearly manifest. Unwilling to take no for an answer, the king badgers the Shahir until the latter finally comes up with something resembling a favor: to construct a memorial in honor of his guru, "the one who taught us our art, our songs, off which we make our living."[87] Instead of a new edifice, the Shahir and his colleagues request that the existing "*Janata Sangeet Vidyalaya*" ("Public Music School") be renamed as "*Pandit Omkar Sangeet Vidyalaya*" ("Pandit Omkar Music School") in tribute to their teacher. Though unimpressed by the seeming triviality of this demand ("If you had asked me to change the name of the country, I would have done that too"), the king accedes to it, and issues orders and announcements to that effect. The rest of the play dramatizes the violence and capitulations set in motion by this "trivial" request, and the systematic victimization of the subaltern shahir community that follows from it. The renaming is strongly opposed by the "public," who start rioting and attacking the shahirs, destroying their homes, and driving them out of their neighborhoods, while the king vacillates and feigns ignorance.

The characters and setting of this plot are fictional and somewhat farcical, but the premise is not. Waghmare's script thinly allegorizes the controversy and turmoil surrounding the renaming of Marathwada University, one of the most flagrant instances of state-sponsored violence on Dalits in

[85] Ibid., 90-91.
[86] Shelke, "Yogiraj Waghmare," 374.
[87] Waghmare, "Aga Je," 91.

recent history. In 1977, many Dalit groups, spearheaded by the radical anti-caste organization, the Dalit Panthers, began agitating for Marathwada University to be renamed Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University. While many student groups with diverse political affiliations initially supported this motion, when the resolution to rename the University was officially passed by the Congress government in 1978, there was extreme backlash, and an organized, targeted assault on Dalit populations throughout the region.[88] Ostensibly, this violence was fueled by anger at the high rates of unemployment resulting from caste-based affirmative action policies. But in reality, inter-caste tensions had been brewing in the region for decades; as Gail Omvedt notes, "Dalits fought in Marathwada to retain possession of lands for cultivation; caste Hindus related violently. Dalits getting education, reservations in jobs, building new houses in the villages provoked burning resentment from other low and middle castes in this backward and impoverished region."[89] The "Namantar" or "Name Change" issue became a pretext for this resentment to be expressed and avenged. Yet, as the mass pogrom continued, official figures and records systematically underreported the carnage, falsified facts and numbers, and restricted press coverage, creating a completely different picture of events within popular media channels.[90] It is this process of systematic misrepresentation and disavowal that Waghmare illustrates in his play, albeit within a more fictionalized context.

Denial/Disavowal

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[88] Atyachar Virodh Samiti, "The Marathwada Riots: A Report," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 14, no. 19 (1979) 845-852.
[89] Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 65.
[90] Atyachar Virodh Samiti, "Marathwada," 845-852.

Unlike *Avarta* and *Kaifiyat*, where the dramatic action often reaches its apogee through displays of caste-based violence, *Aga Je* does not stage any kind of inter-caste conflict at all; in fact, the Shahir and his kinfolk never reappear in the play after the initial exchange with Maharaja Indrasen, when he concedes to the renaming request. We do hear this decision being protested backstage, while the stage is engulfed in darkness. We also hear the soundscape of a rampage, an advancing mob, gunshots, shrieks, sobs and finally a radio newscast reporting the riot. Yet none of this violence is enacted, and the perpetrator and victims are never in view. What we see, instead, are the behind-the-scenes machinations of how these events are managed by the state machinery, as the king and his ministers strategically plan their response. In showcasing this perspective, despite its very specific contemporary historical context, the play acquires a universal and prophetic quality, showcasing ploys and tactics that are uncannily resonant with the anti-democratic rhetoric of current regimes in India and elsewhere.

When the riots break out, the clueless king first hears of them through reports provided by his deputy, the Pradhan. Upon his recommendation, Maharaja Indrasen calls a meeting of all the leading ministers, journalists and intellectuals. The journalist then explains that prior news reports are all fake, and that "the international press is exaggerating the reality of the situation" while the state-controlled press has the "real news:" that the people killed were not artists, but criminals, so their murder is an act of public justice, and the perpetrators should be feted. Meanwhile, the Pradhan who has gone to "investigate" the riot-affected areas, returns to claim that the shahirs set fire to their own houses for publicity. As the situation worsens, these representations of "reality" become increasingly specious and insular. In subsequent political assembly, when a sole "opposition leader" tries to advocate for the persecuted shahirs, he is swiftly discredited and ousted, while the other politicians declare that in fact, there were no riots around the renaming issue at all, and no shahirs were killed; though a few incidents of violence were orchestrated by "anti-social elements" in

the region, they were unrelated to the issue, and in fact, those protesting the name change remained utterly peaceful. The entire sociopolitical establishment, from the press to the army, work together, convincing the Maharaja to indefinitely defer his order to rename the music school. Instead, they accuse the shahirs of trying to "capitalize on Pandit Omkar's name," labelling them as "anti-nationals," who should be arrested and stripped of their citizenship.[91]

By the end of the play, these verbal disavowals escalate into action; in the last scene, as Maharaja Indrasen conducts his official rounds, he is confronted by a preternatural calm:

> Maharaja: Pradhan-ji, where did the riots happen? I don't see anything…so where was the arson? Where was the bloodshed? I don't see any blood and all that…but where are the shahirs? Their tears and their cries…I don't hear any such things.

The king encounters "no complaints from any quarter" during his visit. "If there are no complaints, how could there be any violence?" he asks rhetorically in his final public address. "Why reproach the public over *that which never even happened?*"[92]

In the midst of these hegemonic denials, the renaming issue is sidelined. Even though the idea of a memorial to Pandit Omkar emerges as a means to recognize and reward the Shahir and his colleagues, by the end, the provenance of this act of memorialization is completely elided, and the connection to the shahir community is purposefully severed. The majority forces persecute the shahirs while also mouthing platitudes in praise of their teacher, and propose ambiguous, hypothetical plans to construct a separate, more "appropriate memorial" for Pandit Omkar. Thus, the very context that endowed this cultural memorial with symbolic meaning is doubly erased:

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[91] Waghmare, "Aga Je," 98-99.
[92] Ibid., 100.

through the literal demise and displacement of the shahirs and their art, and through the ideological denials that insist these acts of violation *never even happened*.

On the whole, in the span of a few, incisive scenes, *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi* raises several trenchant questions about the memorialization of Dalit cultural production, and the conditions of such remembrance: what material purpose does memorialization serve if the artists themselves are marginalized? And what symbolic value can memorialization have if history and reality themselves are structurally denied and disavowed? Naturally these questions are not answered in the course of the play, and perhaps they cannot be answered in any satisfactory way at all. But in provoking them, this work expresses a more conflicted view of history and its invention; here, the recreation and rewriting of history is not a radical act as per Suzan Lori-Parks' formulation and as *Avarta* and *Kaifiyat* elaborate through their genealogical interventions. In *Aga Je* such inventions are yet another instrument of hegemonic power, that reinforce, rather than resist, the destruction of subaltern cultural production.

V. Absented Women

The three plays discussed in this chapter vary widely in their formal and thematic composition, but there is one conspicuous point of convergence between them: there are no female characters in any of these works. This omission is not incidental, as their absence is written into the script in all three texts. In *Avarta,* the stock character of Radha does not appear because "nowadays there is a ban on the Radha-Krishna scene." In *Kaifiyat,* the appearance of the *lavani* dancer Sundara is perpetually deferred – "Sundara's dance will surely happen" we are told, but only after the narrator has his say – and ultimately denied, "there's no Sundara today, nor her dance." In *Aga Je Ghadalechi Nahi*, the absence of the female dancer is a precondition and impetus for the performance itself: "I

am of the firm opinion that you can indeed perform a *vag* without any dancers and milkmaids," the narrator declares in his prefatory speech, and the rest of the play substantiates this claim.

The absence of female characters in these plays follows from their radical and revisionist mobilization of the *tamasha* form. Within Ambedkarite cultural discourse, the reclamation of *tamasha* as a new political genre (that is, *jalsa*) was premised on the excision of certain elements: devotional invocations and exchanges featuring Hindu gods and goddesses were removed and/or replaced with invocations of Ambedkar and skits on anti-caste agitation. Another crucial modification in these *jalsas,* as Rege notes, was the exclusion of women performers. In conventional *tamashas*, women perform on stage primarily as *lavani* dancers, but given the rampant sexual exploitation and objectification that women had to endure in this role, this form of labor was counted among the various menial and degrading caste-based occupations that Ambedkar exhorted Dalit communities to reject. As a result, *lavani* dancing and dancers were completely excluded from *jalsas,* and placed beyond the purview of any potentially progressive reclamation. As Rege puts it, within Ambedkarite reappropriations of *tamasha*, "the role of the lavani dancers is not reformulated but excluded." Through such wholesale repudiation of *lavani* artists, and totalizing equation of female performers with sexual servitude, "the patriarchal ideology of the dominant castes and classes was again reiterated," and consequently, these popular political genres are marked by "the complete absence of women."[93]

Since the three plays discussed in this chapter are expressly part of and responsive to this Ambedkarite cultural discourse, it is not surprising that the figure of the *lavani* dancer is absented in these texts. What is striking, however, is the still persisting exclusion of any female characters

[93] Sharmila Rege, "Conceptualising Popular Culture: 'Lavani' and 'Powada' in Maharashtra." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 11 (2002): 1045.

whatsoever, even if they are not dancers. This absence is all the more puzzling given that female characters appear in a whole gamut of roles and positions within the larger corpus of Marathi Dalit Theatre in general. Mokashi notes how women have been represented in a range of ways in Dalit plays, from revolutionary reformers who spearhead anti-caste resistance movements, to conservative, superstitious traditionalists, to wronged and helpless victims who are mere objects of hegemonic violence. The complex status of upper caste women within this discourse – especially those who enter into inter-caste marriages – is yet another prominent thematic concern taken up by many Dalit plays.[94] In fact, women feature prominently even in the other scholarly and artistic work by the playwrights of the three plays under discussion in this chapter. Their conspicuous absence in these particular plays attests to the complex ways in which the politicization of *tamasha* within a caste-based discourse is predicated upon the complete elimination of women altogether;[95] and in a broader sense, it gestures towards the complicated negotiations of female sexuality within Ambedkarite caste-based politics in the region in general. Much has been written about the ways in which women had a complicated position within Ambedkarite movements, and the how management of female sexuality and domesticity played a crucial role within these discourses. Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar's landmark work, *We Also Made History,* presents, from an assemblage of archival and ethnographical sources, "a picture of the neglected, underrated woman activist of the Ambedkarite movement."[96] It is essential to add that Dalit women did not simply

[94] See Maya Pandit, "Re-envisioning the Family and the Nation: A Critical Look at Dalit Theatre" in *Modern Indian Drama: Issues and Interventions*, ed. Lakshmi Subramanyam (New Delhi: Srishti Publishers & Distributors, 2008): 205-225.

[95] This seems to be the case in many different kinds of "political" use of *tamashas*, even ones that are not directly affiliated with the Ambedkarite movement. For instance, Shahir Sable, whose work and contribution is summarized in the previous chapter, adapted the *tamasha* form for political performances, and his initial experiments too excluded women altogether, as having a woman on stage would be a "hinderance" for audiences and artists. Shahir Sable, interview, *Chitranand,* 7 February 1982, 38.

[96] Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, trans. Wandana Sonalkar (New Delhi, India: Zubaan, 2008), 41. The "sexual politics of caste" is also

conform to the wider mandates of the anti-caste movement, but "dissented in radical and subtle ways, and sought to transform themselves in everyday lives."[97]

However, in keeping with the dominant Ambedkarite cultural discourse, even though the character of the "Shahir" or male balladeer does appear in a few canonical Dalit plays, like the ones discussed in this chapter, the character of the *lavani* dancer is virtually absent within the Dalit Theatre corpus.[98] These absences become all the more conspicuous in light of the overdetermined and stereotypical ways in which the figure of the *lavani* dancer was represented and mobilized within other popular dramatic genres from the 1960s onwards. These representations and their implications are explored in the next chapter.

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discussed extensively in Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[97] Shailaja Paik, "Forging a New Dalit Womanhood in Colonial Western India: Discourse on Modernity, Rights, Education, and Emancipation," *Journal of Women's History* 28 no. 4 (2016): 17.

[98] Namdev Vhatkar's *Daag* ("Stain," 1956) is a notable exception in this context. Its plot is "based on the life of woman who dances in *tamashas*" and takes up the issue of untouchability from two perspectives: the impact of religious conversion, and the extent to which the "devadasi question" is related to the "eradication of untouchability." These rather capacious questions are addressed via a large cast of characters, and a long, elaborate plotline. As the register of these thematic concerns – and the very fact that they are questions rather than assertions – suggests, Vhatkar's play predates the Dalit Theatre movement both in chronology and in approach. Conspicuously, its prefatory material makes no reference to Ambedkarite agitation, but instead offers several general "solutions" to eliminate untouchability. The play is also distinctive in the degree of interiority and agency it accords to its protagonist, the *lavani* dancer Shakuntala, who despite being trapped in a structurally disenfranchised profession, manages to be angry, and resistant to the powers that oppress her (embodied in the character of the Inamdar). Moreover, the play has another dynamic female character: Dr. Ruby, an educated medical professional who has converted to Christianity as a means of rejecting her former "untouchable" status, and functions as a friend and mentor to the poor and less socioeconomically mobile Shakuntala. See Namdev Vhatkar, *Daag* (Mumbai: Bombay State Government Press, 1956), 4-5. Within the later Dalit Theatre canon, Premanand Gajvi's *Devanavri* ("Woman of God," 1980) centres on the issue of women who are dedicated to temples as a cultural/artistic practice. However, it is not about *lavani* dancers as such. See Premanand Gajvi, *Devanavri* (Mumbai: Majestic Prakashan, 1982).

CHAPTER FOUR

"Our Anklets Are Not Shackles:" Gender, Labor and (Auto)Biographical Performance

"*Our* ghunghroos *[anklets] are not shackles around our feet. They are our strength – as long as the* ghungroos *survive, we survive…"*

– Mohanabai Mahangrekar, *lavani* artist[1]

I. Introduction

There is a famous *lavani* song that goes like this:

Laaj dhara pavana janachi manachi
Potasathi nachate mi parva kunachi

Oh visitor have some shame, for your own sake and for others,
I dance for my livelihood, I care about nobody else.

These lines were popularized by Vithabai Narayangaonkar, a legendary *tamasha* performer and *lavani* dancer, who was born into a family of prolific *tamasgirs*, and was herself most active on stage between the 1960s-1980s. Lines from this *lavani* are excerpted, quoted or referenced in virtually every journalistic and/or academic article (this one included!) on *lavani* performers, and with good

[1] Quoted by Savitri Medhatul in "Mumbai Local with Savitri Medhatul: For the Love of Lavani," Filmed [September 2016], YouTube video, 2:01:29, Posted [September 2016], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWb7nhUCtmo.

reason: they convey the hardships of a *lavani* dancer's life, as well as the temerity of her spirit in confronting them; when invoked in relation to Vithabai's repertoire, these lyrics also capture the artistic virtuosity that breathes life into these lines. It is in such a context that Shailaja Paik cites this *lavani* in her recent essay, almost as an epigraph to her incisive oral history of Vithabai's illustrious daughter, Mangala Bansode.[2] I turn to these lines as an introduction to the central themes of this chapter, which focuses on the figure of the *lavani* dancer, exploring how this figure is constructed as a site and/or instrument for the preservation of subaltern performance cultures.

Previous chapters of this dissertation have engaged with *lavani* primarily as vital and constitutive part of *tamasha;* however, as a versatile genre of poetry, music and dance, *lavani* is also an independent art form in its own right, with a greater geographic reach, and arguably, an older historical provenance, than *tamasha* performance. Much has been written on the highly contested origins, etymology, definition and history of *lavani* in Maharashtra, and these debates, though highly instructive, are now sufficiently represented within scholarly circles that they need no repetition here.[3] However, I do want to draw attention to the frictious status of *lavani* as the most literary, as well as the most expressly erotic, of the "folk" forms of Maharashtra. At the risk of distilling a complex cultural formation into its most rudimentary reception, it would be possible to designate *lavani* as simultaneously symbolizing poetic finesse and erotic excess. Such characterizations are not limited to the form, but extend to the artists who perform them – *lavani* dancers, almost always women, have long been objects of fascination and contempt in equal measure. In literary, cinematic

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[2] Shailaja Paik, "Mangala Bansode and the Social Life of Tamasha: Caste, Sexuality, and Discrimination in Modern Maharashtra," *Biography* 40, no. 1 (2017): 170.
[3] For a distilled, but detailed overview of these debates see Gangadhar Morje, *Marathi Lavani Vanmaya* (Pune: Padmagandha Prakashan, 1999), 1-57. For a more summary version of these debates in English, see Kristin Olson Rao, "The Lavani of Maharashtra: A Regional Genre of Indian Popular Music," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1985), 2-21.

and other kinds of popular representations, the *lavani* dancer is often portrayed as a vamp or temptress, signifying the moral turpitude of the artform of *lavani* as a whole. At the same time, as we shall see, the *lavani* dancer is also mobilized as the ever-fertile site of moral reform, who can be literally and figuratively molded to suit hegemonic projects of cultural conservation. In what follows, I explore the various ways in which the figure of the female dancer is implicated as subject, object and metaphor in the discourse of cultural preservation, and within context of *tamasha* and *lavani* performance in particular.

This chapter is divided into three main sections: it begins with a brief survey of the aesthetic, historical and socio-political processes through which *lavani* dancers have come to be stereotypically portrayed as victims, prostitutes, or cultural paragons within literary, political and public discourse. The following sections of the chapter segue into a discussion of two plays that attempt to provide a more "real" picture of the *lavani* dancer. The first is Sushama Deshpande's *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* ("Her Mother's Story," 1995), a quasi-fictional (auto)biography of a *lavani* dancer, based on months of intensive ethnographic research done at Aryabhushan Tamasha Theatre in Pune. The second is *Sangeet Bari* (2015), a theatre production created and performed in collaboration with *lavani* artists from Aryabhushan Tamasha Theatre. My analyses focus on the ways in which both plays take up and mine the documentary potential of performance, and attempt to write women back as agents within the larger landscape of *lavani* performance as well as its preservation.

II. Representing *Lavani* Dancers: Victim, Prostitute, Paragon

Dramatic Portrayals: The 'Exploited Dancer' trope

The Bombay Censor Board's stipulation for written scripts, as we have seen in Chapter 1, led to the proliferation of a new print genre from 1950s onwards – that of the published *loknatya*. At the same time, as traced in Chapter 2, the genre of the *tamasha-pradhan natak*, or "*tamasha*-based play" emerged as a dominant idiom on urban proscenium stages in the 1960s, precipitated, at least in part, by the phenomenal success of *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara*. As a result of these two interrelated developments, there was a marked rise in *tamasha*-based play scripts written and published from the late 1950s up to the 1980s (and beyond), so much so that it became something of a mini-industry in itself. A number of publishing houses that flourished in this period – like Nimbkar ani Mandali (Mumbai), Tridal Prakashan (Mumbai) and Ajab Prakashan (Kolhapur) and Chandrakant Shetye Prakashan Mandir (Kolhapur) – specialized in publishing these *tamasha*-based scripts, usually in small, cheap paperback editions. Several dramatists of the period, such as Abasaheb Achrekar, K.D. Patil, Jagannath Shinde, A.D Patil, Bansilal Hande, K. Shravan and others, specialized in this style, churning out one *tamasha*-based play after another in rapid succession; Achrekar alone penned more than fifty plays of this ilk between 1955-1995. From a cursory glance at the prefatory and editorial notes of these publications, it is evident that these plays were primarily intended to be (and circulated as) texts for performance. For instance, the introductory note to one of Shinde's plays, published in 1979, exhorts the reader to "perform this play in your village fairs, festivals, processions, celebrations, cultural programs – success is a hundred percent guaranteed."[4] As this missive indicates, while some of the more famous *tamasha*-plays like *Viccha* attained commercial success in large urban auditoriums playing to educated, middle-class audiences, most of these hybrid plays were performed in small towns and villages across Maharashtra by amateur, itinerant theatre groups.

[4] Jagannath Shinde, *Aunda Lagnacha Bet Tharla* (Mumbai: Nimbkar ani Mandali, 1979), i.

In order to cater to this burgeoning market for *tamasha*-plays,[5] most printed scripts have subtitles that summarize the genre, theme and characters. The subtitle of Achrekar's fiftieth play, *Hyo Hyo Pavna Bara Distoy* ("Hey Good-Looking Stranger", 1992) is a representative example: "*Ekach stripatra aslele toofan vinodi tamashapradhan gramin natak*" – "an uproariously funny, rural, *tamasha*-based play with only one female character." The specification of "only one female character" is a recurring conceit, and it is perhaps more indicative of the logistical difficulty of recruiting female performers in these itinerant groups, than an ideological stance of any kind.[6] However, as a widespread dramatic trope, the figure of the sole female character is of particular interest in the context of this chapter, especially because in almost all these plays, the singular female character is (or is sometimes disguised as) a *lavani* dancer. While there is naturally some variation in the theme and content of these *tamasha*-based plays, a majority of them are dramatizations of "*tamasha jivan"* or the *tamasha* life. These dramatizations usually follow a formulaic plot, featuring a lascivious and corrupt Patil (village headman), an exploited and helpless *lavani* dancer who is part of a *tamasha* troupe, and a righteous upper-caste man who serves as her love interest and the Patil's nemesis. Ostensibly, many of these "*tamasha jivan*" exposés seek to portray the injustices meted out against *tamasha* artists, especially the *lavani* dancer. For instance, Balwant Lamkane's *Painjan Rutle Paiyi* ("A Prick of the Dancing Bells," 1982*)* which apparently attained great popularity in rural areas of the Vidarbha region in Maharashtra, is a "tragedy about a dancer's life;" Ram Budke's *Ghungaraat Ranga Patil* ("The Besotted Patil," 1991) is a revenge-plot against a lecherous Patil who routinely harasses a *lavani* dancer.[7] In

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[5] The introduction to Madhav Maruti Pujari's *Disla Ga Bai Disla* (Mumbai: Tridal Prakashan, 1981), yet another *tamasha*-play, has observes that "nowadays there is a trend of doing plays in rural areas" such that people living villages are forming troupes to put up plays in *jatras* (fairs) and so on. It goes on to claim that there are very few plays that cater to that crowd, and Pujari's script is intended as a means to fill that lacuna.

[6] I specify this because as we have seen in Chapter 3, the presence or absence of female characters can be an ideological position, related to the way questions of gender and sexuality are strategically activated and absented in caste-based rights discourse in modern India.

[7] Balwant Lamkane *Painjan Rutle Paiyi* (Nagpur: Prabha Prakashan, 1982); Ram Budke, *Ghungaraat*

these plays (and several others of its kind), the sole female character of the dancer functions as a device to introduce elements of dance and music into the plot, and occasionally also to depict gratuitous scenes of sexual violence against her. Such violence usually takes the form of verbal abuse and unsolicited touch directed towards the dancer while she performs, and sometimes, off-stage, implied rape. The mistreated *lavani* dancer usually gets her deliverance through marriage or death.[8] In many cases, the romantic storyline takes the form of a love triangle involving a married upper-caste man and a *lavani* dancer. For instance, Shantaram Patil's *Aika Ho Aika* ("Oh Listen to Me," 1951), Gopal Takalkar's *Nartaki* ("Dancer," 1968), Shankar Patil's *Lavangi Mirchi Kolhapurchi* ("A Spicy Temptation from Kolhapur," 1968) R. Bargir's *Jalimanchi Peekli Karvanda* ("The Fruit is Ripe," 1970), are all variations on the same basic plot.[9]

In all these plays, the *lavani* dancer is painted as a charming, but ultimately powerless character, a hapless victim of the twin forces of patriarchy and casteism. This is illustrated in the *lavani* dancer Radha's final lines in *Nartaki,* after she is compelled to forsake her love for the upper-caste Shahir who already has a wife:

> Radha: Shahir, some kinds of wood are made into shrines, but some wood is destined only for burning…I am one of those! I'll say one last thing, Shahir, I'll always hold on to the companionship of your poems…my door is forever open to your poetry…(*unlocks the latch*) I'm leaving! Shahir, take care of yourself![10]

Ranga Patil (Kolhapur: Chandrakant Shetye Prakashan Mandir, 1991).

[8] It is worth noting that resolution through marriage is available as an option to these fictional *lavani* dancers because they are primarily associated with the *dholki-phad tamasha* context and communities of performance, where kinship structures are structured around monogamous, heterosexual, patrilineal marital relations. As we will see in later sections, *lavani* dancers who perform in more "courtesan" style contexts do not follow these kinship structures, and such marital domesticity is not as accessibly or desirable.

[9] Shantaram Patil, *Aika Ho Aika* (Kolhapur: Chandrakant Shetye Prakashan Mandir, 1984); Gopal Takalkar, *Nartaki* (Kolhapur: Chandrakant Shetye Prakashan Mandir, 1968); Shankar Patil, *Lavangi Mirchi Kolhapurchi* (Pune: Kulkarni Granthagar, 1969); R. Bargir, *Jalimanchi Peekli Karvanda*

[10] Takalkar, *Nartaki,* 77.

Such one-dimensional portrayals are further exacerbated by the fact that the oppressed *lavani* dancer is most often the only female character in play, thereby leaving no scope for any kind of resistance, subversion or alternative to the status quo.

There are of course exceptions; for instance, Lakshman Kumbhar's *Aadhaar* (1962) contains all the stock characters mentioned above: Bhai, the upper-caste protagonist, who falls in love with Upama, a "Harijan" *tamasha* artist, much to the chagrin of Shyamrao, the village Patil, who staunchly opposes this alliance. But in an unexpected twist, by the end of the play, Upama becomes a womens' organizer, making a rousing speech in favor of unionization of the working classes as "the only path to real progress."[11] Both Upama and Bhai rebel against the existing caste hegemony through which figures like the Patil can exert their authority. However, even in this rather radical play, Upama's capacity for reflexivity is quite limited, and her life and struggles are mostly narrativized by the male characters, primarily Bhai. Like her counterparts in countless other plays, the dancer-turned-activist Upama finds final emancipation through marriage with her upper-caste savior.

On the whole, the *lavani* dancer appears as a central character – often the protagonist – in most *tamasha*-based plays; in many cases, the central conflict of these dramatic plots is the exploitation she suffers at the hands of predatory men. The structure of such exploitation is most evocatively and effectively represented in theatrical terms through the paradigmatic montage of the frustrated and unwilling *lavani* dancer who does not want to dance but is compelled to do so for the sake of livelihood – her own, and those who are dependent upon her. For instance, the *tamasha*-play *Malavarti Manasa* (1962) opens with the members of a *tamasha* troupe despairing over Gajra's (the *lavani* dancer) refusal to perform. "If she doesn't get on stage, then what will we put in our bellies?

[11] Lakshman Kumbhar, *Aadhaar* (Mumbai: Navmaharashtra Kala Mandal Prakashan, 1962), 30.

Stones from the ground?" asks Babaji, a senior male member of her troupe.[12] Ultimately, despite her protestations, Gajra is pushed on the stage and forced to dance. Variations of this scene recur in virtually every play discussed above, and serve to underscore the idea that *lavani* dancers are slaves not only to the whims of patrons and spectators, but to the demands of her fellow *tamasha* artists as well.

Undoubtedly, these representations draw attention to the real, but often invisibilized suffering of professional *lavani* dancers; however, such narratives that portray female dancers as powerless victims are part of, and contribute to, a wider enduring discourse around the status of hereditary female performers in India. While there is no denying the structural inequalities of caste, class and gender within which professional female performers, including *lavani* dancers, are imbricated, allegations of "exploitation" and "indignity," as Anna Morcom points out, have historically been used as pretexts to "rescue" these women and "reform" their art.[13] As noted in previous chapters, such rescue missions have rarely worked as promised, serving only to further disenfranchise the performers, while also stigmatizing their artistic practice. Within the "exploited dancer" narrative – which has historically been weaponized against several groups of hereditary female performers, most notably the *sadir* dancers of South India and the *tawaifs* of the North – the oppressed and unwilling dancer is compelled to dance for her livelihood, but since she is dancing solely for money's sake (and not for art's sake), her dance is a vulgarized commodity akin to (and in by some accounts, equal to) prostitution. Many of the plays discussed above profess to remedy this perception, demonstrating how outrageous it is for powerful men to expect sexual favors from *lavani* dancers; however, by repeatedly evoking the specter of prostitution, even if to ultimately disavow it,

[12] Vinayak Devrukhkar, *Malavarti Manasa* (Kolhapur: Chandrakant Shetye Prakashan Mandir, 1962),
[13] Anna Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 205.

such representations draw upon the same associations of unlawful and illicit sex work that have come to be attached to hereditary female dancers since the colonial period.

Performers and Prostitutes: Dance, Labor and Legislation

The equation of professional female performers with prostitutes has its roots in regimes of control instituted by the British colonial empire in India in the late-19th century. By the 1860s, under several state administered caste census and ethnographic indices, the occasionally overlapping but distinct communities of prostitutes and courtesans had all been lumped together as constituting a "caste of prostitutes."[14] Such categorization was not only an instrument of social humiliation, but also had practical consequences, especially with the passing of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1868.[15] This act stipulated compulsory examinations of "prostitutes" to screen for venereal diseases, and authorized forcible relocation of courtesans to areas outside the city.[16] In the case of the courtesans of North India, such harsh treatment was, at least in part, a retaliation for the role this historically powerful and elite community played in catalyzing a mass revolt against the crown in 1857.[17] At the same time, the easy equation of courtesans with prostitutes also stemmed from the British authorities' inability to account for (and thus govern) the unconventional and multiple sexual liaisons that professional female performers typically entered into. Even when such non-marital liaisons were apparently legitimized through religious sanction – as in the case of the *devadasis* of South India – colonial authorities sought to bring them into the domain of the secular under the

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[14] Shweta Sachdeva, "In Search of the Tawa'if in History: Courtesans, Nautch Girls and Celebrity Entertainers in India," (PhD Diss, University of London, 2008), 321.
[15] Judith Whitehead, "Bodies Clean and Unclean: Prostitution, Sanitary Legislation, and Respectable Femininity in Colonial North India," *Gender & History* 7, (1995): 41-63.
[16] Morcom, *Illicit Worlds,* 35
[17] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India.," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 2 (June 1, 1990): 25.

charge of prostitution.[18] The identification of female performers as prostitutes, thus, was a critical piece of the British empire's strategy of governance, that revolved around "bringing the entire Indian population within its ambit either through a process of exclusion (through the criminalization of social practice) or through co-optation (via marriage reform)."[19]

This quest for social reform reached its zenith in the anti-*nautch* campaign of the late-19th century, a sustained reform movement premised on the idea that "*nautches,*" or dance performances, were a "social evil" that had to be eradicated in order save women from moral ruin.[20] Much has been written about the multifarious, and often contradictory, ways in which the anti-*nautch* campaign dismantled existing systems of power and patronage within which hereditary female performers exercised their authority as artists and citizens.[21] These studies highlight how the anti-*nautch* campaign, by decreeing dance performances as unlawful and immoral, further cemented the conflation of female performers with prostitutes.

Curiously, the performing arts of Western India, and the Maharashtra region in particular, seem to be conspicuously absent from these accounts of anti-*nautch* campaigns, which are largely

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[18] Kalpana Kannabiran, "Judiciary, Social Reform and Debate on 'Religious Prostitution' in Colonial India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 43 (October 28, 1995): 60

[19] Kannabiran, "Judiciary, Social Reform and Debate," 60.

[20] The word "nautch" is an anglicized distortion of the vernacular *naach*, which literally means "dance" in several Indian languages. In the colonial reformist discourse "*nautch*" referred to the widespread practice of female artists performing for mostly mail audiences in public/semi-private settings like courts and salons.

[21] See Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (November 2, 1985): 1869–76; Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance;" Sachdeva, In Search of the Tawa'if;" Morcom, *Illicit Worlds*; Anjali Arondekar, "Subject to Sex: A Small History of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj," *South Asian Feminisms*, (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2012); Sarah Waheed, "Women of 'Ill Repute:' Ethics and Urdu Literature in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2014, pp. 986–1023.

focused on the hereditary communities of North and South India.[22] Given the relative lack of scholarly inquiry into this particular topic, it is difficult to speculate precisely why the rhetoric of "anti-*nautch*" is not present in historical accounts of say, *lavani*. However, it is clear that Victorian adjudications of morality, as articulated within the cultural realm, did impact the lives and status of *lavani* dancers in indirect ways, even if they were not explicitly framed as "anti-*nautch*." Rege proposes one such pattern of indirect impact: the Victorian style of theatre emerged in India as a civilized contrast to the "licentious and immoral folk forms" of the native populace; in turn, the Marathi theatre emerged in imitation of the Victorian theatre, and in opposition to "immoral" folk forms like *tamasha,* thereby precipitating a simultaneous "desexualisation" of the *tamasha* form (which no longer had erotic *lavanis* as its main draw) and the "resexualisation" of the *lavani* dancers, who were now alienated from their creativity, and were compelled to commodify their "sexual labor" through other means.[23] This process is complex, and Rege describes it in persuasive detail in her essay. For our purposes, however, it would suffice to point out that *lavani* dancers were also implicated, albeit differently, in the performer as prostitute formulation propagated by the colonial regime.

Such associations have had severe and damaging long-term consequences for communities of hereditary dancers, and as we have seen in the previous section, they continue to circulate, albeit in different registers, within the contemporary landscape. Recent dance scholarship highlights how

[22] There are accounts of the impact of the reform rhetoric as a whole on nomadic tribes and Dalit castes in the region. There was a sustained movement to abolish the practice of ritual dedication of *Muralis,* that is young girls from Dalit castes and nomadic tribes who were dedicated to god Khandoba, in the early 20th century. See Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question : Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 61-66. Such ritual dedication practices often coalesce with hereditary performance traditions (as in the case of "*devadasi*" performers), and there are anecdotal references to this overlap in studies like Rao's cited above. However, there is no detailed account of the long-term impact of anti-*Murali* agitations on *lavani* performance as a whole.
[23] Sharmila Rege, "The Hegemonic Appropriation of Sexuality: The case of the lavani performers of Maharashtra," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 29, no. 1, 2 (1995): 30.

the "an erotic/public performer is a prostitute and therefore is not a performer" equation, as Morcom calls it, persists across a range of postcolonial contexts.[24] Kareem Khubchandani's recent monograph on gay Indian nightlife analyzes the blanket ban on dancing in Bangalore's bars and pubs, imposed inconsistently between 2008-2014, as part of "a long history of policing dance in India through the regulation of public women, particularly women from heritage performance communities, and tribal and subordinate castes" originated by the anti-*nautch* campaign.[25] The most paradigmatic instantiation of anti-*nautch* sentiment in the contemporary context, however, is the controversial and infamous ban on Mumbai dance bars imposed in 2005.[26] As William Mazzarella points out, the ban on women dancing in bars (to entertain male clientele) was in part a legacy of colonial adjudications on public obscenity, and in part provoked by the incommensurability of bar dancing with "the cultural politics of consumerist globalization," given that such dance is neither a traditional form, nor a legibly modern cultural practice. Many of arguments made both for and against bar dancing reiterated the idea that bar dancing is expressly *not* an art form: while petitioners against the ban claimed that these dancers had limited skills and were thus incapable of any other kind of employment, the state authorities argued that "their activity was not sophisticated enough to count as a 'skill'" and thus they should be equally suited to any other kinds of unskilled labor.[27]

[24] Morcom, *Illicit Worlds,* 40. The persistence of this equation is also noted in Brahma Prakash's work, who offers the concept of "cultural labour" to address "the underlying problem [that] artistes and performers from the subaltern communities fit neither as artistes nor as labourers. Yet they are artistes and labourers, and therefore their contributions need to be recognized on both fronts." Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019): 8
[25] Kareem Khubchandani, *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 74.
[26] Interestingly, the ban on bar dancing was instituted through amendments to section 33 of the Bombay Police Act 1951, the same section under which the Tamasha Censor Board was constituted in 1953, as noted in Chapter 1.
[27] William Mazzarella, "A Different Kind of Flesh: Public Obscenity, Globalisation and the Mumbai Dance Bar Ban," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38 (January 1, 2015): 486.

Questions of skill and labor animate the discourse around bar dancing in unexpected ways; Anna Morcom, who designates the Mumbai bar dance phenomenon as "anti-*nautch* II," points out the remarkable parallels between the morality-based discourse of the anti-*nautch* social campaign, and the rights-based discourse of the anti-bar dancing legal campaign. The pro- and anti-ban positions in the bar dance case were framed around universalist conceptions of freedom, choice and exploitation that were not, in essence, too different from the anti-*nautch* stance. Public opinion both for and against the ban, articulated in the language of human rights, portrayed the affected bar dancers as victims of exploitation who "had no choice," granting them no degree of free will or independent agency.[28] The critical intervention into this ideological stalemate was that of the Bharatiya Bargirls Union (BBU), which reframed the issue as one of labor conditions and livelihood, and studiously avoided any questions of morality, victimhood or choice. The mass mobilization and legal defense mounted by the BBU resulted in the ban being struck down in 2006.[29]

Interestingly, *tamasha* and *lavani* emerged as crucial points of reference in these debates. They were invoked rhetorically to expose the government's seemingly hypocritical stance on erotic public dancing (if *tamasha* and *lavani* shows are not branded as indecent or obscene, then why should bar dancing be targeted?) and to construct a "cultural justification" for bar dancing, positing that "ladies undertaking dance performances for the entertainment of men is part of the cultural tradition of Maharashtra, e.g. *Lavanis, Tamashas,* etc."[30] Such comparisons, however, were strongly refuted

[28] Of course, many of these bar dancers, were compelled into this profession because of socioeconomic circumstances. However, this "choicelessness," as Morcom and others point out, must be understood as the product of larger historical structures, and not sensationally portrayed as a presentist problem of "human trafficking." The issue of compulsion/choice is addressed more extensively in section IV. For more on the divergent feminist perspectives on this debate, see Meena Gopal, "Caste, Sexuality and Labour: The Troubled Connection," *Current Sociology* 60, no. 2 (Mar 2012) pp. 222-238.
[29] This decision passed by the Bombay High Court was upheld by the Supreme Court of India in 2013.
[30] Mazzarella, "A Different Kind of Flesh," 482.

during the court proceedings, on the grounds that they were "an affront to the Lavani dancers, who were seen as preserving the culture of Maharashtra." As Sameena Dalwai notes, "the distinction between the 'respectable and hardworking' Lavani dancers and the 'cheating and easy money' earning bargirls were highlighted by Media (sic)."[31]

Lavani Dancing and/as Cultural Preservation

This characterization of *lavani* dancers as respectable "keepers of culture" was a relatively recent development in the early 2000s, a product of concerted attempts, from the 1990s, to promote and revive *lavani*.[32] A watershed event that spearheaded these efforts was the establishment of an annual *lavani* competition in the town of Akluj (in Solapur district in South eastern Maharashtra) from 1993 onwards. This enterprise was envisioned and implemented by the prominent political dynasty of the Akluj region, the Mohite-Patils, who likely approached this project as enabling strategic cultural patronage and political visibility.[33] Each year, *lavani* dancers and troupes from across the state would travel to compete in this event, and the winners would accrue awards and recognition. By all accounts, the annual Akluj *lavani* competitions precipitated a radical shift in the public perception of this art form and inaugurated an era of efflorescence for *lavani* performance, particularly in urban centers like Mumbai and Pune.[34] Around the same time, in 1994, a Philadelphia-

[31] Sameena Dalwai, "Dance Bar Ban: Doing a Feminist Legal Ethnography," *Socio-Legal Review* 12 (2016): 24.
[32] The term "keepers of culture" is a citation from Doris Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and God's Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Precolonial India," *The Courtesan's Arts Cross-cultural Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[33] Both Shankarao Mohite-Patil and his son, Vijaysingh Mohite-Patil were Members of the Legislative Assembly, (MLAs) and affiliated with the National Congress Party. Akluj has long been the seat of power for the Mohite-Patil family. Shankarao Mohite-Patil was an ardent supporter of Maharashtrian folk cultures, and was the main source of inspiration behind this competition.
[34] Prakash Khandge, "Aklujchi Lavani," *Maharashtra Times,* Jan. 26, 2000.

based doctor, Meena Nerurkar, devised and directed a three-hour *lavani*-centric performance entitled *Sundara Manamadhe Bharali* ("Her Beauty Has Bewitched Me"). Scripted by Vasant Bapat, this was "a full-length play explaining and using all the popular *lavanis* from Peshwa times to current times."[35] After a successful run of shows in the United States, this performance was invited to India in May 1994, where it instantly became a tremendous hit, as well as, in Nerurkar's words, "a cultural milestone" and "a status symbol."[36] Landing, as it did, at the cusp of economic liberalization, *Sundara Manamadhe Bharali*, an international import with local appeal, was perfectly suited to the newly globalizing cultural marketplace in India. As Nerurkar explains: "Our specialty was that we attracted an upper-middle-class crowd. Up until then only lower-class people used to go for Tamashas. All of us are well-placed professional people from the US doing this as our hobby. This fact attracted all the full houses."[37] This rhetoric around the "specialty" of the changed demographics of performers and spectators is, of course, a familiar one, as it closely parallels the shifts in *tamasha* performance and viewership in the 1960s and 1970s described in Chapter 2.[38] In many ways, *Sundara Manamadhe Bharali* stands as a contemporary example of what Amrit Srinivasan calls as the "reform and revival" model of cultural regulation,[39] whereby a "reformed" (or "cultured" as Nerurkar chooses to describe it),[40] version of a derided art form, historically sustained by hereditary female performers, is "revived" for and by upper-caste/class consumption.[41] The overwhelmingly positive response that this show received accrued less from the content, and more from the sense of "overawe" that local

[35] Julia Hollander, *Indian Folk Theatres* (London: Routledge, 2007), 122.
[36] Meena Nerurkar, "Aar Gadya, Hauns Nahi Fitli," *Maharashtra Times,* Jan 3, 2004; Hollander, *Indian Folk Theatres,* 30.
[37] Hollander, 23.
[38] In fact, Nerurkar quotes the famous "inverted woman" conceit from *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* in describing her approach to *lavani*!
[39] Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival."
[40] The Marathi word Nerurkar uses is *"sanskrutik."* Nerurkar, "Aar Gadya."
[41] In a two-day seminar on "Tamasha" organized at Mumbai University in 2004, Pragya Lokhande remarked that shows like *Sundara Manamadhe Bharali* have reduced *tamasha* into a product, and that such shows are yet another means for upper classes to "hijack" these popular art forms.

audiences felt at "the 'Indianness' of the American settlers;" in any case, this "immigrant *tamasha*" – as it was dubbed in one contemporary review – illuminated and engendered public demand for this new genre of *lavani*-based entertainment programs. The diasporic memorialization of this native art form, it would appear, provoked domestic projects of memorialization along the same lines.

The success of *Sundara Manamadhe Bharali* paved the way for a number of *lavani*-based stage shows (popularly known as "banner shows") like *Sola Hazaraat Dekhni* ("A Beauty Like No Other" 1999), *Sakhi Mazhi Lavani* ("Lavani My Companion" 2000), *Natarangee Naar* ("A Many-Splendored Woman" 2002), *Navarangi Naar* ("A Dazzling Woman," 2007), and many others of its ilk. These "banner shows," as they came to be known colloquially, were performed in large indoor auditoria on raised stages, usually to a mixed audience of middle-class men and women. For the most part, they were conceived and performed by local artists, many of whom had achieved recognition by winning *lavani* competitions, such as the one in Akluj.[42] By the late 1990s, there were a number of such competitions and festivals in various parts of the state, in part because the right-wing Shiv Sena-BJP alliance, which came to power in the state in 1995, aggressively promoted *lavani* as a form of authentic Maharashtrian cultural heritage. Notably, the Maharashtra government organized a widely publicized "Lavani Mahotsav" ("Lavani Festival") at the Y.B. Chavan auditorium in Mumbai in 1998. This two-day event was hosted by the then-culture minister Pramod Navalkar and education minister Anil Deshmukh, with the former declaring that "cleaning the folk form from its 'fallen' status and restoring dignity to it" was "a priority" for his department.[43] Navalkar was notorious for his zealous commitment to protecting "Indian culture" and attacking anything that he deemed to be

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[42] For instance, Surekha Punekar, who conceptualized and performed in many of these shows is a prominent *tamasha* artist, who shot to fame in 1998, when she won the Lavani Mahotsav organized in Mumbai. She is one of the artists Shailaja Paik writes about in her essay on *tamasha* artists. See Paik, "Mangala Bansode."

[43] Quoted in "Welcoming the Monsoon," *The Afternoon,* Jun 12, 1998

vulgar; through the 1990s, he used his office to crack down on all kinds of alleged obscenity – ranging from M.F. Husain's paintings, to rock lyrics, to kissing couples – earning the sobriquet of "Mumbai's moral policeman." The state promotion of *lavani*, thus, fit perfectly with the nativist agenda of the culture department: it could upheld as a paragon of culture, while also serving as an object of moral outrage and cleansing. In keeping with the prevailing spirit of the time, the major selling point of the myriad *lavani* shows that cropped up in the late-1990s and the early-2000s was that they "prove[d] that lavani dances need not be vulgar."[44]

Such rhetorical consonance does not, of course, imply that all the *lavani* artists and their performances were mere mouthpieces for the ruling government and their right-wing ideology; rather, it is more that these hitherto sidelined and struggling artists suddenly found the political winds blowing in their favor, and seized the opportunities it offered. Claims over cultural authenticity and ownership, of the sort that galvanized the Shiv Sena into its *lavani* revitalization scheme, often stem from jingoistic and xenophobic ideologies that reproduce the most virulent forms of cultural nationalism. At the same time, although glorifications of "tradition" have not historically benefited hereditary artists, within the contemporary context, a renewed interest in heritage and intangible cultures can (and is) strategically appropriated as a means "to offer tools of legitimacy and agency" to marginalized female hereditary performers, including *lavani* artists.[45] In other words, while the sudden popularity of *lavani* in the 1990s was orchestrated through a combination of right-wing propaganda and a new horizon of cultural consumerism, it opened up avenues for more professional opportunities and greater public visibility for *lavani* dancers. In fact, advocacy groups like the Tamasha Parishad (Tamasha Society), the Tamasha Kala Kalavant Vikas Mandir (Association for the Progress of Tamasha Art and Artists) and the Akhil Maharashtra

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[44] Ashlesha Athavale, 'Not Just Tamasha," *Indian Express,* Mar 22, 1999.
[45] Morcom, *Illicit Worlds,* 26.

Sangeet Bari Tamasha Kalavant Mahasangh (All Maharashtra Federation of Sangeet Bari Tamasha Artists) had been agitating for state-sponsored *lavani* competitions for years; it is only in the propitious climate of 1990s that these demands came to any kind of fruition.[46]

The emergence of the banner show genre followed from (and reinforced) the portrayal of *lavani* dancers as sites and vehicles of cultural preservation. This shift had some positive material consequences: most significantly, the format of the banner show, performed in large halls, was both more lucrative as well as physically safer, since performers were on a raised stage at a distance from spectators. However, broadly considered, the proportion of *lavani* dancers who could profit from these banner shows was relatively small; and as the reputation and financial prospects of this genre increased, "girls from good families" began joining *lavani* troupes in larger numbers.[47] For the most part, the exaltation of hereditary *lavani* dancers was more ostensible than actual, and did not translate into any sweeping changes in the everyday lives of most artists.

The Unknowable Courtesan

In the preceding sections, we have seen how *lavani* dancers have been categorized variously as victims, sexual commodities and as carriers of culture. Such categorizations are not mutually exclusive, nor are they ahistorical abstractions; rather, as illustrated above, they proceed from specific historical circumstances and sociopolitical exigencies. The attribution of such diametrically opposing characteristics to the same figure – especially the figure of a woman – is, of course, an overdetermined trope. The representation of *lavani* dancers in these terms is part of a wider discourse around the economic and cultural status of female erotic performers in general, who are

[46] Prakash Khandge, "Kajvanchi Zindagi," *Loksatta,* Mar. 10, 2001.
[47] Prachi Karnik, "Aika Ho Aika," *The Afternoon,* Jul 6, 2003.

often categorized under the broad designation of "courtesan." As an analytical subject, the figure of the courtesan becomes the site of multiple and contradictory characterizations, one who is "never wholly knowable" as she "exists on the permeable cusp between reality and representation."[48] Courtesans, as per Bonnie Gordon and Martha Feldman formulation, all "reside in a performative space," irrespective of the particularities of their individual contexts. That is to say, the line between reality and artifice is purposefully blurred, such that a courtesan can always present herself as a construction of her (male) client's fantasy. If we are to take courtesans seriously as artists, and acknowledge their pivotal role as cultural contributors, it is imperative, Gordon and Feldman argue, to attend to the ways that courtesans "produc[e] themselves."[49] Considered from this perspective, the domain of "art" and "artifice" are quintessential to the courtesan, as a professional prerequisite and a tactic of self-preservation; and in a fundamental sense, they are not oppositional to the "real," but constitutive of the everyday reality of these artists' lives.

Much recent scholarship, especially on Indian hereditary performers, interrogates how these overlaps between artifice and reality are deployed strategically by artists to "produce themselves" so as to negotiate and resist hegemonic patriarchal structures. Amelia Maciszewski's study of contemporary Hindustani music, for instance, examines how the female performer is "both an object of the (male) gaze and purveyor of her own artistic (and professional) gaze – thus simultaneously subsuming her individual identity into the extant artistic form and deploying her creative agency within it."[50] In a similar vein, Soneji's monograph on *devadasis* focuses on the "unfinished" processes of "self-presentation, subjectivity, and autocritique" among his interlocutors,

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[48] Bonnie Gordon and Martha Feldman, "Introduction," *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-cultural Perspectives*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 6,8.
[49] *Ibid.,* 8.
[50] Amelia Maciszewski, "Gendered Stories, Gendered Styles: Contemporary Hindusthani Music as Discourse, Attitudes, and Practice," (PhD Diss, The University of Texas at Austin, 1998), 44.

emphasizing the "the role of performance in fashioning subjectivity."[51] By making manifest the interplay of the real and representational, these critical scholarly interventions attempt to illustrate that the image of the "never wholly knowable" courtesan is a deliberately composed artistic construct. To "know" the courtesan, then, is to know the processes – historical, material, social, political – through which she is produced, and produces herself, as "unknowable."

The term courtesan here functions as an umbrella category, and naturally there are exceptions and variations within and across cultures (as the wide-ranging essays assembled in Gordon and Feldman's expansively-titled *The Courtesan's Arts* demonstrate). And while the historical circumstances surrounding *lavani* diverges and converges in significant ways from other hereditary traditions of performance in India, here too, we encounter a similar impulse, within recent scholarly and artistic practice, to move beyond stereotypical representations, and delve into the inscrutable "reality" of *lavani* dancers' self-presentations. The following section analyzes two recent theatre productions that foreground, mobilize, and in some ways recapitulate, this elusive quest for unmeditated access: Sushama Deshpande's *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* ("Her Mother's Story," 1995) and Bhushan Korgaonkar's *Sangeet Bari* (2015).

III. Documenting Lavani Dancers: *Tichya Aaichi Goshta*

Tichya Aaichi Goshta ("Her Mother's Story") is a one-woman show written, directed and performed by Sushama Deshpande, a prolific theatre artist who has been actively working (primarily in Marathi) for more than three decades. Deshpande's unusual and informal dramaturgical style is informed by her deep commitment to telling stories of underrepresented women, and performing

[51] Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures,* 13-14, 24.

them for underrepresented audiences. She began her long stage career with the acclaimed *Whay Mee Savitribai* ("Yes, This is Savitribai," 1989), a one-woman show dramatizing the life of the 19th C feminist activist and educationist, Savitribai Phule (1831-1897). Deshpande travelled widely with the show, "tak[ing] Savitri's story into every nook and corner of Maharashtra" and beyond. Apart from writing the script and directing herself, she also created a Hindi translation of the play, and adapted the original Marathi version into a film.[52] *Tichya Aaichi Goshta*, her second play, premiered in 1995, and was in continuous production for more than twenty years.[53]

Tichya Aaichi Goshta is a quasi-fictional autobiography of a *lavani* dancer. As Deshpande explains, the idea of doing a play about a *tamasha* artist had been on her mind for many years, even before she had written her first play. She had even taken a stab at writing a script: "But everything I wrote came out sounding sad in a middle-class way. I would read what I had written and junk it. Tamasha women and sentiment did not go together."[54] Having arrived at a pliable dramaturgical form through *Whay Mee Savitribai* – research-based, fictionalized first-person narration – she decided to adopt the same approach for her *tamasha* idea, and began conducting ethnographic research at Aryabhushan Tamasha Theatre in the early 1990s.

Music By Turns: Hereditary Lavani Dancers

The *lavani* dancers Deshpande researched belonged to a specialized, and hitherto largely disregarded, tradition of performance called *sangeet bari*. Although *lavani* has now been assimilated

[52] Shanta Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama From 1843 to the Present* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000): 350.
[53] Since 2016, Rajashree Wad has been performing her version of this show, adapted from Deshpande's script.
[54] Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre,* 353.

into a variety of genres (including plays, film, and banner shows) historically, there were primarily two major contexts for *lavani* performance: the *dholki phadacha tamasha* (often glossed simply as *tamasha* and described in previous chapters) and *sangeet bari.* In essence, the latter "consists of women who sing and dance for the entertainment of male patrons."[55] These women are part of different troupes ("or parties"), and each troupe is headed by (and named after) one or two of its senior members. Unlike *dholki phadacha tamasha*, which is a traveling show, *sangeet bari* is a more permanent establishment. There are dedicated *sangeet bari* theatres – such as the Aryabhushan Theatre in Pune – which function as performance venues and residential quarters. Troupes of female *lavani* dancers live within these theater complexes and perform there every evening. The first part of these daily performances is a ticketed stage show. The etymology of the term "*sangeet bari*" follows from the format of these stage shows, where each party gets a set amount of time to show off their skills, and solicit bids and private performances. They come up on the stage turn-by-turn (in Marathi, *bari-bari*); hence the term *sangeet bari* or "music by turns." Following this ticketed public show, an audience member can commission a *baithak* – or a private performance in a more intimate space – with one or two of his favorite dancers. The public shows are priced nominally, but the *baithaks* command a much higher price.

Deshpande's decision to write a play about *sangeet bari* dancers is significant for several reasons. For one, these subset of *lavani* dancers rarely find any kind of representation within popular media, not even as stereotypes. In the *tamasha*-plays glossed in the previous section, for instance, the dancer-protagonists all belong to the *dholki-phad*, or traveling *tamasha* tradition; none of those maudlin tales feature *sangeet bari lavani* dancers. In many ways, *sangeet bari* artists face greater social stigma; since they earn their livelihood primarily through private performances for exclusively male

[55] Olson, "The Lavani of Maharashtra," 86.

audiences, they are regarded with more suspicion that other formats of *lavani* performance. Although many celebrated film and stage *lavani* dancers – like Leela Gandhi, Usha Chavan, Madhu Kambikar and others – come from the *sangeet bari* tradition, for the most part, they are loath to admit it. Unlike *dholki phadacha tamasha*, which has a number of different components including a farce, a skit, *lavanis* etc., *sangeet bari* centers purely on the performance of *lavanis,* without any narrative element. *Sangeet bari* has conventionally been a forum for showcasing more traditional and literary *lavanis;* however, it has come to acquire such negative connotations, likely because this context of *lavani* performance is more directly implicated in the "performance as prostitution" dictum. In its origins, format and functioning, it closely resembles the other hereditary performance traditions targeted by the anti-*nautch* campaigns.

While the term *"sangeet bari"* only came into circulation in the twentieth century, it is part of a much longer genealogy of performance in the region, dating back, by some accounts, to the 14th century.[56] Historical accounts of *sangeet bari* usually trace its origins to older courtesan cultures; Namdev Vhatkar, for instance, posits that *sangeet bari* originated from the "*kolhatani naach"* (or "dance of the *kolhati* women"), a form of secular, entertainment-oriented dance performed by women for remuneration.[57] This form, according to Vhatkar, emerged in the Maharashtra region when it was under Islamic rule (by the Deccan Sultanates and later the Mughal Empire) in the 16th-17th centuries. On account of the similarities in movement vocabulary, he speculates that the early exponents of *kolhatani naach* must have trained in the North Indian dance form of *kathak* (a reinvented "classical" form with its own checkered history of absenting female public performers, especially courtesans).[58]

[56] See Olsen, "Lavani;" and V.S. Kadam, "The Dancing Girls of Maharashtra," *Images of Women in Maharashtrian Society,* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998).
[57] Namdev Vhatkar, *Marathichi Lokkala Tamasha,* (Kolhapur: Chandrakant Shetye, 1951), 40.
[58] Vhatkar, *Marathichi Lokkala,* 40-41. For more on the reinvention of Kathak, see Pallabi Chakravorty, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2008).

Incidentally, these hoary *kathak*-related associations were foregrounded when banner shows gained popularity, thus furnishing some kind of classical basis for *lavani* dancing, more so because many banner show artists belong to the *sangeet bari* tradition. The current composition and structure of *sangeet bari* communities closely parallels those of other female hereditary performers in India, such as the courtesans of Lucknow portrayed so evocatively by Oldenburg, or the *sadir* dancers represented in Soneji's scholarship. These communities are largely matrilineal, and women wield a considerable amount of power and authority as the primary earners of their households. Professional female artists do not marry, but they do have long-term sexual and/or romantic relationships and children. Like many other female hereditary performers, women in *sangeet bari* communities mostly belong to historically dispossessed nomadic tribes, specifically the *kalvat, dombari* and *bhatu-kolhati*, and are thus subject to similar structures of enduring marginalization.[59]

Deshpande's research into *sangeet bari* involved spending long hours with *lavani* dancers at Aryabhushan Theatre – a timeworn *tamasha* institution hidden away on a busy road in the heart of the city of Pune.[60] In addition to watching public stage shows and commissioning private *baithaks*, she also visited the theatre during the day, observing from the sidelines as the women went about their daily chores. In various interviews, Deshpande has described the hesitation she first encountered as an outsider lurking in the theatre at all hours. But being shrewd businesswomen, the *lavani* artists also never directly asked her to leave. Eventually, the women started opening up to her,

[59] Such nomadic and semi-nomadic communities were officially criminalized under the colonial Criminal Tribes Act (1871); this law was finally repealed in 1952. Although there are no accounts of the direct impact this law had on female hereditary performers, this history of dispossession via criminalization had severe long-term consequences; denotified tribes (as the formerly criminal tribes are now known) remain among the most marginalized sections of society.
[60] As mentioned in Chapter 1, Aryabhushan Theatre was an important centre during the tumultuous period of the last 1940s-1950s when *tamasha* legislations were being passed. The manager Ahmedsheth Tambe was involved in fighting the ban, and the many significant meetings and seminars about the ban were held at Aryabhushan.

though they came up with innovative strategies to provide information, yet not reveal too much of themselves.[61] "None of the women would speak of their experiences as their own," she notes. "Each would pretend that the things she was speaking of had happened to some other woman."[62] Such exteriorization of experience was possible, Deshpande eventually realized, because trajectories of many of their lives were very similar. She then started consolidating these stories into the composite life narrative of Hira, a middle-aged *lavani* dancer, the paradigmatic protagonist of *Tichya Aaichi Goshta.*

Whose Life, Whose Story?

Tichya Aaichi Goshta functions as both a documentation of *lavani* dancers, as well as a commentary on the politics of such documentation. In terms of plot, the play unfolds as a series of free associations, memories that trigger other memories, all narrated from the protagonist Hira's perspective. As we journey back and forth through Hira's life, we encounter characters of all shades: past lovers, patrons, fellow artists, family members, friends, and most importantly, Hira's daughter Ratna, who is a journalist. Ratna is the unseen but omnipresent antagonist; the full title of the play – *Tichya Aaichi Goshta Arthat Majhya Aathavnicha Phad* ("Her Mother's Story, or, A Space for My Memories") – encapsulates the intergenerational conflict that animates this text. The documentary impulse at work here is written into the script, for the catalyst for Hira's reflections is her daughter Ratna's sudden desire to chronicle her mother's life. As the play begins, Hira recalls this exchange

[61] The information about Deshpande's ethnographic process has been collated through three different interviews, contained in Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre;* Sushama Deshpande, "Conversations@DSM", uploaded on Jan 16, 2019, YouTube Video, 1:51:54; and a personal interview with the author.
[62] Gokhale, *Playwright at the Centre,* 354.

(since it is a one-woman show, both characters are essayed by Hira herself, who frames this conversation, and all others in the play, as reported speech):

> [Ratna]: I want to write about you –
>
> [Hira]: What?
>
> [Ratna]: About you, I want to write something…
>
> [Hira]: Okay, but what?
>
> [Ratna]: All of this. Your art, your life.
>
> [Hira]: What for?
>
> [Ratna]: There aren't any *tamasha* artists like you anymore. So to keep this art alive…[63]

Hira is unwilling to surrender her life experiences into the hands of her unappreciative daughter, who has always been embarrassed and critical of her mother and her art. But after Hira receives a prestigious government award, Ratna wants to advance her own journalistic career by writing about her now famous mother. Although Hira refuses her daughter's request, it becomes an impetus for her to "come before you all myself, to have my say, my way," and she begins narrating her life to the audience instead.[64]

Hira's distrust of her journalist daughter is a reflection of the misgivings that many real *lavani* dancers expressed to Deshpande while she was conducting her research. They tended to be suspicious of journalists, feeling that they were routinely misrepresented in the press. Deshpande (who herself used to be professional journalist) attempted to allay these fears by making her intentions clear from the very beginning, telling the dancers that she wanted to make a performance

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[63] Sushama Desphande, "Tichya Aaichi Goshta," (unpublished play script, 1994) 2.

[64] Deshpande, *Tichya,* 3.

about them. When she had a completed a draft of the final script, she went back to Aryabhushan and did her first reading for all the *lavani* artists whose lives had been interwoven into the text. "I told them, you tell me if anything sounds wrong," Deshpande recalls. By her assessment, the dancers felt they were accurately represented in her script, and conveyed their appreciation through flowers and gifts.[65] Deshpande has always maintained that the perspectives and characters presented in *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* are not products of her own imagination. "I just started spending time with them, and then I could understand their life […] this is their story."[66]

Tichya Aaichi Goshta, thus, unambiguously presents itself as a bona fide documentation of *lavani* dancers' lives; at the same time, the play itself expresses a deep skepticism about such ethnographic documentary practices, as embodied in the adversarial character of Ratna. Through the tense dynamic between Hira and Ratna, the play raises critical questions about who has the right to record and disseminate the experiences of *lavani* dancers. Since Ratna is not herself a dancer, Hira argues, she has no right to appropriate these stories for her own benefit, even if her own lived experiences have been shaped by them. However, it would appear that this critique has less to do with representational politics (who can speak?) and more to do with intention (why do they speak?). In the diegetic world of the play, Ratna is a bad candidate for documenting Hira's life because she is an insider who has resolutely rejected *lavani* and has only a partial and prejudiced understanding of her mother's life. Conversely, in the non-diegetic world of the play's production, Sushama Deshpande, an outsider who has willingly immersed herself into the cultural milieu of *lavani*, and is committed to representing all facets of these dancers' lives from their own perspective, can document accurately and effectively. Considered as a whole, the play – as a both a dramatic text and a performative event – suggests that there are good and bad practices of documenting subaltern

[65] Personal interview.
[66] Deshpande, "Conversations@DSM."

communities like *lavani* dancers, and that the ethical stakes of this enterprise are determined by motive and purpose, rather than insider/outsider status. In so doing, the play also troubles the relationship between documentation and preservation in the context of the performing arts.

Preservation, Education, Transmission

This idea is first invoked in the conversation between Hira and Ratna excerpted above, which continues thus:

> [Ratna]: There aren't any *tamasha* artists like you anymore. So to keep this art alive…
>
> [Hira]: You dance, Ratna.
>
> [Ratna]: Why are you being like this!
>
> [Hira]: Now look here. You didn't want to be in this business, that is why I got you educated…but now why are you so insistent on understanding the very thing you rejected?[67]

Throughout the play, Hira maintains that the only real way for Ratna to "keep this art alive" is by dancing, not by writing about it. In a fundamental sense, Hira's exhortations capture what performance theorists, in recent years, have been arguing for as the ontological essence of all performance: namely, that it cannot be preserved or reproduced in any other form, without becoming "something other than performance."[68] How do we develop means to preserve intangible cultural heritage – like say, *lavani* dancing – that do not reproduce the stultifying colonial logic of the archive? As scholars like Joseph Roach, Diana Taylor, and others demonstrate, there are no straightforward answers to this question, and any serious engagement with this problem would require a *longue-durée*, genealogical approach to the hegemonic relations of power within which the art and artists under consideration are entrenched.[69] However, in the context of this play specifically,

[67] Deshpande, *Tichya,* 3.
[68] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked.*
[69] See Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Hira's response is also framed by the intergenerational drama that animates her narrative. As we learn early in the play, *lavani* dancing has been a hereditary profession (as is the case with most *sangeet bari* dancers) for women in Hira's family: "I am a *tamasha* performer. My mother was a performer, my grandmother was a performer, my great grand-mother was a performer. But I did not bring my daughter into the *tamasha* profession. I broke the family tradition."[70]

Much of the play's digressive plot revolves around Hira's childhood memories, and the lessons she learnt (philosophically and literally, as dance training) from her mother. She is unable to pass on these lessons to her uninterested daughter, who has forsaken not just the art of *lavani* dancing, but also the lifestyle of hardship and resistance that it entails. Instead, she has opted for a more upwardly-mobile career option that would allow her the privileges afforded to other women. Within *sangeet bari* communities, custom dictates that once a girl ties the dancing bells (or *ghunghroos*) around her ankles, she is considered to be wedded to the dance and is no longer permitted to marry in a conventional sense; dance becomes her primary means of livelihood. But girls like Ratna, who do not enter into the hereditary profession, presumably have more career options, and to some degree, can pass in mainstream society. In fact, the play's opening conceit is that Ratna is seated among the upper-class audience members in the elite auditorium, and is indistinguishable from them, as evidenced through Hira's direct address to the spectators seated before her:

> Hira: Hey you, sitting next to the door! Who is that sitting behind you? Is it Ratna hiding there? My Ratna is the sort to wear pants bottoms and some loose baggy thing on top. But there are so many people here who would fit that description![71]

This friction between formal education (as a vehicle for social acceptance and mobility) and hereditary training (as an instrument of cultural transmission and communal belonging) is not

[70] *Ibid.,* 4.
[71] Deshpande, *Tichya, 2.*

unique to the dynamic between Hira and Ratna, or even to *lavani* dancers more generally. It comes up repeatedly with reference to almost all hereditary performance traditions, especially in the post-liberalization era in India. Typically in such situations, professional female dancers strive to educate their children so that they can escape the stigma and shame that has increasingly come to be associated with these art forms; education, as Susan Seizer observes in the context Special Drama artists in Tamil Nadu, allows for "ascendency beyond the morass of their hereditary profession."[72] In the case of *sangeet bari* communities in particular, the liberatory power of education has been most effectively crystallized in Kishore Shantabai Kale's acclaimed 1994 memoir *Kolhatyacha Por* ("Son of a Kolhati"). Born as the illegitimate son of a prominent politician and an unwed *lavani* dancer, Kale overcame the wretched conditions of his childhood to become a medical doctor and an AIDS-awareness activist.[73] His book describes the extreme neglect and violence he suffered at the hands of his family and community members, especially his mother, who abandoned him, gave up dancing, and supported herself by entering into a long-term relationship with an older, propertied man. The *lavani* dancer/mother figure is depicted as a deeply exploited, but also inconsiderate personality. *Kolhatyacha Por* was intended, and received, as an exposé of the *kolhati* community and its harsh treatment of women; unsurprisingly, the book was denounced by many members in the community for a host of reasons. The politically powerful male members viewed Kale as a traitor, and many artists resented his portrayal of *lavani* dancers as callous and self-serving, and questioned the veracity of his account. The *lavani* dancers at Aryabhushan – Deshpande's interlocutors and research subjects – had a similar stance: "The women were not publicly against him because he was the son of one of their own. But they did not attest to his story," Deshpande recalls.

[72] Susan Seizer, "Heredity abandoned, and Kannagi's courageous decision to act in Special Drama," *Samyukta* 16, no. 2 (July 2016): 183.
[73] Kishore Shantabai Kale, *Kolhatyacha Por* (Mumbai: Granthali, 1994).

In many ways, *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* is the inverse of Kale's account, narrated from the point of view of the mother as she contends with the perils of her profession and struggles to provide for her unappreciative children, who ultimately weaponize their education against her. In the play, Hira speaks of her son Gaja, who, like many of Hira's other male relatives, has grown into a patriarchal opportunist, living off his mother's earnings while also consistently disparaging her and her art. If *Kolhatyacha Por* is a parable about the critical role of education in enabling a dispossessed young boy to perceive and expose structural inequalities, *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* dramatizes how such liberal education can, and does, reinforce stereotypes and existing inequities. As her excursive recollections meander from one anecdote into another, Hira enumerates the various hardships she has had to endure as a *lavani* dancer – mistreatment from family members, unwanted attention from patrons, financial trouble, health issues, and so on. Yet, she does not seem to believe that education presents a solution to these ills; in fact, she states plainly that she educated her children only at the behest of her late partner (Gaja and Ratna's father). In Hira's lived experience (and that of so many other contemporary hereditary performers),[74] mainstream education has only served to make her children more conservative and intolerant. On the other hand, she is not overly concerned or nostalgic about continuing the *lavani* line either – through Ratna or anyone else. She takes pride in "breaking the family tradition," and mocks bourgeois sentimentality around cultural preservation, asserting, "If the old art form doesn't survive, what's the point in despairing over it? Like everything else, art must also change."[75]

Indeed, the subject of *lavani* preservation is not extensively addressed or resolved in this play; it is just one of the many topics that Hira touches on in her reflections. While there are a few *lavani*s

[74] The devadasi dancers in Soneji's account also express very similar sentiments about the ambivalent role of education.
[75] Deshpande, *Tichya,* 14.

interspersed throughout, they are primarily used as a device to establish Hira's character as a professional artist. Sushama Deshpande did take intensive *lavani* lessons during her research stint at Aryabhushan, but her performance in *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* does not include a lot of singing or dancing.[76] As Deshpande explained, "I was more interested in their life than in their dance."[77] Consequently, the play seems to deliberately withhold the spectacle that *lavani* proffers, and its investment in documenting the lives of *lavani* dancers does not necessarily translate into an interest in preserving the art form itself.

Lives and Afterlives

In Hira's life narrative, the occupational hazards of being a *lavani* dancer are presented in conjunction with the empowerment that accrues from being a domestically unbound, economically independent woman. From the outset, she presents her personality and lifestyle as unconventional, especially in comparison to the normative expectations of the upper-class audience: "Now look here, I am a woman. An unmarried one, that too. But my business is conducted exclusively with men. When such a woman starts talking about herself, you will have to listen, and you will be amazed."[78] Throughout the play, she points out the various ways in which her life differs from that of a typical woman, and to a large extent, also diverges from stereotypical representations of female performers. While there is a lot of sorrow in Hira's tale, she seems to be able to dictate the terms of her own life. Her relationships with her older, married lovers are not coercive or exploitative, but are based on mutual affection and respect. In fact, these relationships, Hira implies, are more consensual and free than marital ones, which consign wives into lives of domestic servitude. "While playing the part of a

[76] Rajashree Wad's version of the play apparently has more of a *lavani* performance element.
[77] Personal interview.
[78] Deshpande, *Tichya,* 3.

'woman,' I, my mother, my grandmother, we all also had the strength to always regard ourselves as human beings," she remarks, a right that many married women are not afforded. Hira's directness sets the tone of the play, and also dictates the form. The non-fictional register of the play is made manifest through Hira's constant acknowledgement of the audience, their surroundings, the physical arrangement of the space, and so on. In relating the myriad tribulations of her life, she frequently exhorts the audience to bear witness to, and reflect upon, their complicity in furthering these injustices. The potency of the play derives in large part from these direct addresses; the play ends with the protagonist calling upon the audience to take responsibility for her last rites, and "not allow the caste panchayat [council] to lay a single finger on my corpse."[79]

It is through these calls to bear witness that play derives its performative power, because for the kind of urban, upper- and middle-class audiences that are in the audience, even the simple fact of being addressed by a female performer – especially one who is speaking, rather than dancing – is unprecedented enough to constitute a radical act. As A. Mangai succinctly observes, "notwithstanding whatever Hira says or argues, her presence creates meaning."[80] The incongruity here, of course, is that Hira is not actually a "real" dancer, and is ultimately a character played by an actor. Whatever discomfort or trepidation an audience member may experience through the performance would, at least to some degree, be mitigated by this fact. Moreover, despite Deshpande's attempt to present Hira as a paradigmatic representation of a *lavani* dancer, there are conspicuous elisions in her portrayal of a *sangeet bari* performer's life. Most notably, the play, as Lata Singh points out, makes virtually no mention of caste and the critical role it plays in shaping these artists' socioeconomic circumstances: "Deshpande gives them subjectivity and agency. But

[79] Deshpande, *Tichya,* 39.
[80] A. Mangai, *Acting Up: Gender and Theatre in India, 1979 Onwards* (New Delhi, India: LeftWord, 2015), 143.

somewhere Deshpande slides towards the over glorification of Tamasha women artists as a result of failing to capture the complexity of their lives."[81] This is an important critique, and Deshpande's text does gloss over many structural issues, choosing instead to focus on stories of individual trials and triumphs.

However, it is also worth noting that *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* did have tangible material outcomes that extended beyond the particular circumstances of the play, mostly because of Deshpande's own efforts in this direction. While it is difficult to make any direct connections, it does seem that in the wake of Deshpande's play, there was increased public and academic interest in *sangeet bari* artists, and in Aryabhushan Theatre in particular. Apart from television and print interviews with *lavani* dancers, that Deshpande orchestrated herself, newspapers also ran full-page features on the everyday lives of dancers who lived and performed at Aryabhushan, describing their daily routines, living quarters, kinship structures and so on. Unsurprisingly, Sushama Deshpande is quoted as an insider-authority in many such articles. In fact, Sharmila Rege's landmark essay on *lavani* dancers, the first scholarly (and still authoritative) inquiry into the *sangeet bari* form in English, also drew extensively on Deshpande's research, and was published shortly after *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* opened. On the whole, one might say that *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* has had a long afterlife, inspiring new modes of engagement with *lavani* and *lavani* dancers. It is one such project that we turn into in the next section: Bhushan Korgaonkar and Savitri Medhatul's 2015 production, descriptively titled *Sangeet Bari.*

IV. Involving Lavani Dancers: *Sangeet Bari*

[81] In Mangai, *Acting Up*.

Sangeet Bari, as the title suggests, is a theatre production that explores and dramatizes various facets of the *sangeet bari* tradition. (Note that in this section, when both first letters are capitalized – as in *Sangeet Bari* – it refers to the theatre piece, and when all letters are lower case, it references the performance tradition). Directed by Savitri Medhatul and written by Bhushan Korgaonkar – who also act as narrators – this production interweaves historical, ethnographic and autobiographical accounts of the art of *lavani* with live performances and demonstrations by artists who have been hereditarily trained in it. Primarily performed in Marathi, this documentary musical theatre piece is still in production, attracting full houses whether it is played in its original Marathi version, or in the more recent Hindi translation. When it opened in 2015, *Sangeet Bari* was the culmination of a decade of research into *lavani* by its two collaborators. A key turning point in their explorations came in 2006, when Sushama Deshpande suggested they pay a visit to Aryabhushan Theatre in Pune. This experience, in turn, inspired Medhatul, a documentary filmmaker by profession, and Korgaonkar, a writer, to travel around to several other *sangeet bari* establishments all over Maharashtra (there are currently about 45-odd functioning *sangeet bari* theatres in the state). This extensive fieldwork resulted in a documentary film (titled *Natale Tumchyasaathi,* 2008, directed by Medhtaul)*,* a non-fiction book (also titled *Sangeet Bari,* 2014, written by Korgaonkar), and finally a theatre production, *Sangeet Bari*, that synthesizes the findings from their previous projects.

The exploratory spirit that characterized Medhatul and Korgaonkar's multimodal inquiry into *lavani* is reflected in the form and aesthetic of the *Sangeet Bari* production, which is explicitly presented as an ongoing research project, albeit in theatrical form. In fact, the idea for this production emerged through a short lecture-demonstration the duo offhandedly put together (in lieu of a reading) for the launch of Korgaonkar's book. This ad-hoc presentation proved to be such a success that it was then expanded into a full-fledged production under the auspices of a newly-formed theatre group, Kali Billi Productions. There is no real plot as such, and *Sangeet Bari* is

essentially a compilation of anecdotes, quotes and contextual information, largely culled from the book; however, it is anything but a dry presentation of facts. What gives the play its sparkling, infectious energy are the numerous *lavanis* interspersed into the narration, all performed live by *lavani* artists, intermixed with extemporized dialogue and commentary. As I discovered through my fieldwork, the *lavani* dancers and musicians who feature in *Sangeet Bari* are not just hired hands embellishing the show, but creative collaborators in the enterprise.

Real Women, Real Lavani

It is around 8 pm on a Sunday evening in August 2017 at the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in Mumbai, India. The heavy monsoon air outside has slackened into stillness, but inside the Experimental Theatre, the atmosphere is electric. Resplendent in a peacock-blue *saree,* glittering with jewelry, Akanksha Kadam spins, quivers, and skips across the stage, her anklets tinkling to the beat as the song approaches its chorus:

> *Havemadi garva, madanacha vanva,*
> *Lagli kalila odh bhungyachi*
> *Lahi lahi hote maza angaachi,*
> *Lahi lahi hote maza angaachi!*
>
> *A cool breeze is blowing, and it's setting me aflame,*
> *A forest fire of love is raging in my heart!*
> *In this heat, I'm a bud whose thirsting, for the bee who'll drink me up*
> *You can see the blood rising hectic through my face.* [82]

[82] Translated into English by Paromita Vohra.

The double-entendre of the lyrics shine into meaning through her flirtatious winks, jiggles and pouts. The audience is enthralled, clapping and cheering boisterously. Even before the song has ended, the chant goes up: "Once more! Once more!" Akanksha raises an eyebrow, breaks into laughter, and dances off the stage. She is one of the seven *lavani* artists who are part of the permanent cast of this show, which currently includes three dancers – Pushpa Satarkar, Akanksha Kadam, Shakuntala Nagarkar; one singer, Lata Waikar; and three accompanists – Chandrakant Lakhe, Sunil Jawale, and Sumit Kundalkar. Most of these artists belong to the *sangeet bari* tradition and have been hereditarily trained in the form, with the exception of Akanksha Kadam, who is a banner show/stage performer.[83] The fundamental premise of the play is "if you really want to understand *lavani,* then your quest must begin with the women who perform it."[84] This maxim is borne out even in the stage design: the narrators, Savitri and Bhushan, are seated on one side of the stage and the musicians are stationed at the other end, with the *lavani* dancers occupying centerstage.

The distinctive percussive rhythms of the *dholki* and a musical phrase played on the *paipeti* announce that the show is about to begin.[85] As the stage lights come on, Savitri exhorts the audience:

> Savitri: Welcome! This is not one of those shows where you sit behind a fourth wall, evaluating the play from a critical distance. If you don't jump right in and get involved, it will be no fun for you, and no fun for us![86]

The playful banter of these opening lines sets the informal tone for the rest of the play, which is structured as a back-and-forth between Savitri and Bhushan, all directly addressed to the audience. It also introduces the play as a patently non-fictional, almost educational, enterprise. There are no

[83] This difference, as we will see in later paragraphs, is significant, also because as a non-hereditary performer, Akanksha is not bound the same kinship rules, and is thus permitted to marry and simultenously have a professional dance career.
[84] Bhushan Korgaonkar, "Sangeet Bari" (unpublished play script, 2015).
[85] These are instruments that typically accompany *lavani* performance.
[86] Korgaonkar, "Sangeet Bari," 1.

characters, no fictional settings, no plot – everyone in the show plays themselves. Savitri begins the show by providing context for their research, summarizing their journey with *lavani* thus far, and remarking, "We realized that the first encounter with *lavani* has to be direct, without the mediation of a film or a book. Because *lavani* is not something that you assimilate gradually...it strikes you directly and jolts you out of your senses!"[87] As the show unfolds in two acts over two hours, audiences get a taste of this direct experience, as the three dancers, each with their own distinctive style, present a range of *lavanis,* alternatively performing solo, in twos, or as a group. Obviously, these highly-scripted and carefully curated and rehearsed performances are not exactly unmediated, but it is no accident that in terms of atmosphere, *Sangeet Bari* attempts to re-create the most intimate and improvisatory context for *lavani* performance: that of the private, commissioned *baithak*. As Savitri's introductory comments indicate, the imagined (and in most cases, actual) audience for this show are urban, educated, middle- and upper-class men and women who would not have any first-hand experience of a *baithak* in its original setting within a *sangeet bari* theatre, and whose previous encounters with *lavani* would have primarily come through Marathi films.[88]

Accordingly, *Sangeet Bari* is scripted as an initiation into the "real" world of *lavani,* and here too, we find an implicit link between education and preservation, though in a wholly different register. The logic goes something like this: if more audiences can be educated about *lavani* within its specific historical, political and socioeconomic context, and experience its intoxicating artistry first-hand, there will be an overall increase in the level of knowledge of and respect for the form. This, in turn, will create a bigger class of discerning spectators, and raise the demand for traditional *lavanis,* which hereditarily trained *lavani* dancers can cater to. Through this process, the art form can be

[87] "Sangeet Bari" video shared with the author.

[88] As Rege points out, Marathi films played a major role in hypersexualizing the figure of the *lavani* dancer, while also excluding most hereditary performers from these films and the lucrative revenue streams that they offered.

preserved, while also uplifting the dancers who have historically nurtured and developed this form, but are compelled to acquiesce to prevailing public demand for the sake of their livelihoods. This rationale dictates many of Kali Billi Productions' later explorations into *lavani*, as detailed in following sections.

Although this preservation-through-education approach professes a certain commitment to the idea of the "real" or "authentic" ("*khari"* in Marathi) *lavani,* the repertoire of songs assembled in the play is quite agnostic, ranging from well-known traditional *lavanis,* to obscure, specialized ones, and extending to other popular musical genres like *qawwali* and even a Bollywood film song. One reason for this heterogeneity is that as part of its educational mandate, *Sangeet Bari* attempts to showcase a whole gamut of *lavani* styles, highlighting variations in theme, pace, genre and context. The play includes demonstrations of erotic (*shringarik*) *lavani*, "tourism" *lavani* (describing a place), upright and seated forms of *lavani* performance (*khadi* and *baithakichi lavani* respectively), regional differences in singing styles, and so on. But there are also other pressing factors motivating the musical eclecticism of *Sangeet Bari*, illustrated in the exchanges leading into the performance of the Bollywood song towards the end of the first act. As Pushpa, one of the *lavani* artists, launches into *In Aankhon Ki Masti Ke* (a classic song from the film *Umrao Jaan*, based on the life of a courtesan), Shakuntalabai*,* a senior *lavani* artist, interrupts her and addresses the audience:

> Shakuntalabai: What happened? Are you surprised? Do you think we can fill our stomachs just performing *lavanis*? There are all kinds of people who come to us […] We perform whatever a person requests. If they ask for a Hindi song, then we do that, if they ask for Marathi, we do that […] if we deny their request then how will we fill our stomachs? Okay, do you get it now? Shall we resume the performance?[89]

[89] "Sangeet Bari," video shared with the author.

This interjection achieves two ends: on the one hand, it establishes *lavani* dancers' complete, and almost debilitating, dependence on their clients' demands. On the other hand, it also advertises the dancers' extraordinary versatility, and their ability to cater to these wide-ranging demands. This is a crucial point, because the main objective of *Sangeet Bari* is to present *lavani* dancers as skilled artists successfully negotiating a structurally inequitable cultural landscape. In this portrayal, aspects that would ordinarily be considered as moral or aesthetic capitulations – such as pandering to common taste or assimilating into the mass cultural mainstream – are recast as evidence of the *lavani* artists' creative acuity and entrepreneurial spirit. Where *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* highlights the *lavani* dancer's resilient and subversive personality, *Sangeet Bari* focuses on her artistic prowess. Everything the three dancers (Pushpa, Akanksha and Shakuntalabai) do on stage – singing, dancing, acting, flirting, fighting – is narrativized as further demonstration of their skill.

The Work of Art: Labor, Skill and Performance Preservation

This approach marks a significant shift in the rhetoric around *lavani* dancing, because as described in the context of bar girls in previous sections, the question of skill in relation to female public performers is a vexed issue with a contentious legacy dating back to the colonial period. Adjudications on matters of skill, as we have seen above, are closely linked to conceptions of agency, victimhood and labor, and depending on the context in which they are deployed, either reinforce or resist the performer as prostitute equation. By placing artistic skill literally centerstage, *Sangeet Bari* orchestrates a renewed focus on material labor and work in broaching questions of agency, exploitation and resistance.

Through the course of the play, the narrators delve into minute details about the social composition of *sangeet bari* communities, the current state of the art form and the material conditions

within which the artists live and work. In so doing, they emphasize the uniquely microcosmic socioeconomy of the *sangeet bari* theatres, interweaving their own observations with quotes collected from theatre managers, musicians, dancers, and customers. As they explain, and as affirmed by my visit to Aryabhushan theatre in July 2017, the men who come who frequent *sangeet bari* theatres are always referred to as "customers" (*girhayik*) and not as "spectators" (*prekshak*). Unsurprisingly, the overtly transactional nomenclature assigned to the performer-audience relationship has contributed to the stigma associated with *lavani* artists and the art form as a whole. Rather than venturing into the moral connotations of these terms, the narrators explain them purely in terms of economic exchange:

> Savitri: The people who come to *sangeet bari* theatres take time out of their day, commission an hour-long *baithak*, and shell out a lot of money for it! The *lavani* dancers shower special attention on them, laugh and banter with them, and entertain their song requests. So a person who enjoys these specialized services in exchange for a price would be called what? A customer, right?[90]

While this might seem like a relatively minor rhetorical shift, it is part of the play's larger investment in portraying *lavani* dancers as agentive actors within the existing status quo. It describes the social ostracism faced by these artists and their families, illustrated most poignantly through one particular story – which again recalls Kishore Kale's narrative – that of a young doctor, a *lavani* dancer's son, who was so traumatized by his colleagues' taunts that he took his own life. In telling this somber story, the narrators focus on *lavani* artists' collective action in organizing public rallies and seeking legal redress against the perpetrators. By constantly centering *lavani* dancers' ability to transform and transcend their circumstances, this play attempts to formulate a more artist-centered justification for the preservation of performance traditions that emerged, and continue to thrive, within highly patriarchal and hegemonic frameworks. For instance, the narrators observe that

[90] Korgaonkar, *Sangeet Bari,* 4.

though *lavani* songs usually adopt the female perspective, they were all "written by men, and were not intended to express the woman's point-of-view. But when women perform these songs, they imbue it with their subjectivity, such that it becomes their own. In that way, *lavani* becomes a powerful expression of the woman's perspective."[91] In the play, this point is persuasively illustrated by a *lavani* performed by Shakuntalabai Nagarkar – her commanding presence and sardonic irreverence temper any fetishization enacted by the lyrics.

Of course, such maneuvers inspire some degree of skepticism, insofar as they seem to repackage compulsion as resistance; yet, it is this very tension between obligation and subversion that animates the whole play – it is strategically slackened and contracted throughout, never quite settling on one. As the play comes to a close, the last anecdote the narrators reproduce quotes Mohanabai Mahangrekar – a veteran *lavani* artist, cited in the epigraph of this chapter – and tells of her decision to shut down her artistic practice. Her reflections end on a sobering note: "I know that what we perform in our *sangeet bari* theatres is an art. And to be able to bring yourself and other people so much joy through your art…that should be a good thing, shouldn't it? I've experienced that joy a lot in my life […] but you have to also remember that most of the girls [who work in *sangeet bari* theatres] tie on these dancing bells only to support their families. Never forget that they are here because they have no other choice."[92]

Simply put, *Sangeet Bari* does not posit artistry and compulsion as oppositional categories, which, as elaborated in the first few sections of this chapter, is the basic premise of morality-based valuations of female public performance, especially erotic ones. While acknowledging the obligations that bind these dancers to their dance, the play foregrounds not only their artistry, but also the sense

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[91] *Ibid.,* 16.
[92] Sangeet Bari," video shared with the author.

of pleasure, pride and dignity that accrues from their art. Significantly, this explication of art and artistry includes the economy of desire and erotic exchange that *lavani* dancers transact in. Through such spectacular "diva-auratic moments" the *lavani* dancers stage what Lauren Berlant calls Diva Citizenship: "she challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of suffering she has narrated, and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent."[93] The dancers' ability to effortlessly flirt, seduce, tantalize and tease is always in the spotlight, and audiences are constantly goaded – by the narrators and the dancers themselves – to submit to these overtures, and express their appreciation in standard *lavani* fashion, through claps, whistles and *wah wahs*. In many ways, this approach distils the discursive distance we have traveled over the course of this dissertation; while the landmark play *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara,* discussed in Chapter 2, sought to preserve *tamasha* (and *lavani*) by desexualizing the figure of the (metaphorical) woman who symbolizes these performance traditions, *Sangeet Bari* enacts its preservatory power by resexualizing, so to speak, the real women who sustain those traditions.

Interestingly, as with *Viccha,* the presence of women in the audience, who equal or often outnumber men at *Sangeet Bari* shows, both dignifies and complicates this enterprise. In the early run of shows especially, the *lavani* dancers, who are used to dancing for an exclusively male clientele, were confused and somewhat embarrassed by the attention that female spectators showered on them. On the other hand, the women in the audience were upset that they were not receiving any special treatment like the men. During one of the first performances, a group of women approached the director in the interval and complained: "We are here too, we have bought tickets like everyone else, why do the dancers never even make eye contact with us?" Savitri and Bhushan then had to

[93] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 223.

entreat the dancers to interact equally with the women in the audience, and over time, as the dancers themselves acknowledge, they have relaxed a bit and learned to connect with the women as well. Yet, for the more interactive routines in the play – such as a comic bit where Akanksha looks for a suitable match among the spectators, or when Shakuntalabai tries to convince an audience member to elope with her – their chosen targets are almost invariably men.

The creators of *Sangeet Bari* often cite this anecdote of the aggrieved female spectators in interviews and workshops to describe the cult of personality that the dancers in the cast have come to acquire through the production. In fact, Savitri and Bhushan actively encourage the elevation of these *lavani* dancers to celebrity status, inviting audience members backstage at the end of every show to take photographs and selfies. At the risk of making too fine a point of incidental interactions, the fact that demands like these can be so casually made and fulfilled, I suggest, reveals the specter of structural inequality that haunts this performance. It is difficult to imagine such demands being made (and entertained) of performers in other kinds of theatrical contexts, or even to imagine what the optics of such gestures would be if they were advanced by male spectators, for instance. While issues of caste and community-based oppression is broached at various junctures in the narration, the play cannot actually collapse the enduring, asymmetrical power dynamic that structures *lavani* dancing in general, and the *sangeet bari* tradition in particular. For all its incisive interventions, *Sangeet Bari* still remains a show performed by lower-caste women and/or women from dispossessed nomadic tribes for the entertainment of a largely upper- and middle-class/caste audience, and in that regard, it recapitulates the expectations and entitlements that suture these historically unequal performer-spectator relationships. The resolutely upbeat and celebratory spirit of *Sangeet Bari* leaves little room for these structural issues to be explored at length. Despite its professed didactic purpose, the play has a distinctly buoyant quality, which is perhaps what keeps spectators coming back to the show again and again.

Sangeet Bari's emphasis on work, labor and skill animates a larger conversation about the politics of cultural preservation that situates artists and their sustenance at the center. Rather than exalting *lavani* dancers as abstract embodiments of culture and heritage – which, as we have seen, is the case with most nativist investments in *lavani* – *Sangeet Bari* attempts to underscore the various ways in which artists sustain, and are sustained by, these performance traditions. However, any deeper engagement with the political and socioeconomic implications of such preservatory gestures is placed outside the purview of the performance; and while they are never quite resolved, there is more scope for these to be more robustly addressed in the various *lavani* workshops that Kali Billi Productions' conduct on a regular basis. These workshops are imagined and accessed as methodological and aesthetic appendices to the *Sangeet Bari* theatre production.

Lavani Workshops

Though the *lavani* workshops offered by Kali Billi Productions vary in length and format, they mostly have the same structure, with each session loosely divided into theory and practice sections. The theory sections are primarily taught by Bhushan Korgaonkar, and the practical training is led by one of the dancers in the *Sangeet Bari* cast, usually Akanksha Kadam or Shakuntalabai Nagarkar. My observations about these *lavani* workshops is based on my participation in two of them: a one-day workshop I attended in person in June 2019 in Mumbai, and an experimental digital version of the workshop that was conducted online on Zoom over four weekends in October-November 2020. In both iterations, the dance portion was led by Akanksha, who taught us the choreography to *"Lahi Lahi"* her signature *lavani* routine in *Sangeet Bari.* The dance instruction was interspersed with lectures on the historical, social and economic context of *lavani,* and of *sangeet bari* performance cultures specifically. Fundamentally, this information itself is not different from the

narrative material presented in *Sangeet Bari*. However, the greater affordances of time and interactive discussion introduce a new depth of detail in the workshop context.

These *lavani* workshops primarily attract female participants of all ages, mostly professional, working women, who pay a fee (the amount varies depending on the length) to attend these sessions. Many tend to have some sort of background in dance, and on occasion, might have a direct association with *lavani* themselves. Like me, most participants come to the workshop because they have watched *Sangeet Bari* and are now can't get enough of *lavani*! There is much to be said about the rich pedagogical exchanges facilitated through these sessions. In this section I focus specifically on the complex ways in which the workshops enable a deeper engagement with the gendered aspects of *lavani* performance and spectatorship. For one thing, the differing backgrounds of the *lavani* dancers, which are not consequential in the context of the stages production, acquire greater significance in the more intimate workshop setting. For instance, the way participants react to descriptions of the kinship structures within *sangeet bari* communities varies considerable depending on which *lavani* dancer is conducting the dance lessons. Since Akanksha is a banner show artist and is not born into a community of hereditary female performers, she is free to get married and still keep dancing professionally, a difference that Bhushan always draws attention to in his lectures. Participants in Akanksha's workshop reacted to the abstract fact of *sangeet bari* women following non-marital, matrilineal kinship structures with general sense of approval and feminist chutzpah. However, when confronted with such an unconventional woman face-to-face, in the form of Shakuntalabai, when she conducts workshops, the reaction is more visceral, usually a mix of surprise and recognition. As the organizers have described, participants tend to be shocked that someone who "looks just like us" can have such an atypical lifestyle. Of course, differences in the composition of participants across various workshops also account for these divergent reactions;

however, it elucidates the crucial role that embodiment plays in communicating and assimilating complex gender dynamics.

Yet another instantiation of this dynamic is manifest when the workshop organizers prompt participants to engage in *daulatjada* (the practice of offering money to performers as reward or bids) while the *lavani* dancer/instructor performs. In usual *sangeet bari* settings, the more playful version of this involves the dancer coming up with a new move for every cash offering, and the competition is to see what runs out first: the customer's money or the dancer's repertoire. In workshop contexts, this produces a tense ambience, as the dancer is used to the terms of this exchange but the participants are not. On one representative occasion, as Savitri recalls, the mostly female participants were initially embarrassed to engage in such obnoxious acts of solicitation; however, once they got into a group momentum, the women reproduced/reenacted the very same demeaning body language typically adopted by men during such exchanges: offering money between their lips, making mock advances, offering bills and retracting them, etc. These instances, Savitri remarked, make it clear to the artists and participants that the inequity in the performer-spectator dynamic is fundamentally about power, and cannot be simplistically explained away as gendered difference, as often happens in such contexts. They also illustrate the extent to which intuitive responses to such performance scenarios are scripted by popular, stereotypical representations.

At the same time, these workshops also serve to break the standard heteropatriarchal frame in which *lavani* performance is generally embedded. The *Sangeet Bari* stage production does not really challenge the fundamentally heterosexist premise of professional *lavani* performance, though the presence of women spectators does introduce an additional layer of complexity. However, within the more informal and interactive setting of the workshop, the codes of intimacy and desire are

somewhat less prescriptive. Each session of the workshop usually ends with one group of (almost exclusively female) participants performing for the others, at the end of which the instructor provides critical feedback and suggestions. Since the dance training focuses on technique as well as *abhinaya* (or expressions), these workshop performances are overtly sensual and flirtatious, producing a distinct kind of *frisson,* within which the performers and spectators can find ways to momentarily suspend – if not quite relinquish – the heteropatriarchal pretext for these playful provocations. To paraphrase an observation that one of the three queer-identifying women in my cohort of seven female participants made during the last session of the online *lavani* workshop: "It was almost like we had to objectify the teacher, each other, and ourselves as part of the learning process. And somehow that felt very liberating." Yet another participant commented that it "felt like we got permission to talk about gender and sexuality."[94] Naturally, people get different things out of these *lavani* workshops, depending on their own positionality and expectations. In any case, the overall objective of the workshop, in my understanding, is not for participants to acquire any kind of proficiency over *lavani*; rather, it is more akin to what Scott Magelssen terms *simming* – that is "live, three-dimensional environments in which spectator-participants engage in intentionally simulated production of some aspect of real or imagined society." Such simulated environments enable "a different kind of efficacy and social change…through affective, embodied practice."[95] These *lavani* workshops aim to cultivate a more embodied and nuanced understanding of the artistry behind *lavani* performance, and to more fully convey the complexity of these artists' lives. In so doing, they achieve many of the basic functions that Magelssen attributes to *simmings*: invocation of positive

[94] There is much more to be said about queer performance and *lavani* dancing, especially since there is a long and vibrant tradition of gender impersonation within this form. For an ethnographic account of one such gender-bending *lavani* artist, see Bhushan Korgaonkar, "Madhu," in *Bombay Brokers,* ed. Lisa Björkman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), pp: 337-346.

[95] Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 3-5.

future change, reification of abstract perceptions and doctrines, witnessing as a means of creating empathy, and so on. It is difficult to measure the tangible impact of these immersive experiences on the larger cultural landscape; however, one cannot underestimate the value of such simulated environments, where with every vignette and gesture, participants feel compelled to reflect on their own identity, privilege and complicity, and to ask, as Kareem Khubchandani does, in a different, but related, urban performance context: *Who had to leave so that we could dance here?*[96]

V. Conclusion: Real Effects

The two plays discussed in this chapter – *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* and *Sangeet Bari* – draw upon, and intervene in, the lives of existing *lavani* dancers, communities, and establishments. These are not the first, or only, productions to be based on "real" *lavani*. Some banner shows, such as *Sundara Manamadhe Bharali*, also have a somewhat non-fictional quality, and given the unconventional lives of *lavani* dancers, it is not surprising that some of the more famous among them have inspired dramatic adaptation. For instance, the life of *tamasha* doyenne Vithabai, with whom this chapter opens, was the subject of a musical play entitled *Tamasha: Vithabaicha Ayushyacha* ("Tamasha: Of Vithabai's Life") written by Yogiraj Bagul and staged in 2010, eight years after her death. Unlike this memorial tribute, *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* and *Sangeet Bari* are not biographical in a conventional sense. Rather, they may best be described as embodying what Carol Martin terms "theatre of the real," namely performances that "with different means and to different ends, claim specific relationships with events in the real world" and "intend for spectators to reconsider the world around them on the basis of the theatrical experiences these works offer." [97]

[96] Khubchandani, *Ishtyle,* 77.
[97] Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4, 175.

While the two plays are based on ethnographic research, they do not purport to document any one specific *lavani* dancer, but the art form and artists as a whole. In *Tichya Aaichi Goshta,* this is achieved through the amalgamation of various life stories into one composite, prototypical character, who serves almost an everywoman type of figure. In *Sangeet Bari*, the research-based narration oscillates between the general and the particular, interweaving broad contextual information about the art and artists of *sangeet bari*, with personal anecdotes collated from several different sources. In that sense, the *lavani* dancer(s) we meet through these productions are neither completely fictional characters, nor pure reflections of a singular, real personality. By existing somewhere in between these extremes, both of these plays are able to offer insights that both repudiate the dangers of sweeping stereotype, yet are generalizable beyond individuated instances. Specifically, they exemplify how the act of placing a professional *lavani* dancer – and perhaps, by extension, any hereditary performer of minoritarian art forms – centerstage pushes us to question, challenge and transform our approach to the preservation of endangered intangible cultural heritage, particularly performance.

In many ways, the cogency and impact of the ideological positions advanced by these plays accrue not only from the content, but equally, from formal and generic attributes; both these plays produce what Martin, drawing on Barthes, describes as "reality effects," that is, "the result of a form of citation that confers status of legitimacy upon the artwork with the concomitant sense that what is represented is real or has a relationship with what is real."[98] The professed non-fictionality of both *Tichya Aaichi Goshta,* and *Sangeet Bari* endows them a degree of legitimacy and authenticity that distinguish them from the boilerplate *tamasha jivan* plots described in the opening section of this chapter. Of course, such reality-effects, as Carol Martin reminds us, are also deliberately constructed,

[98] *Ibid.,* 5.

and cannot be taken as fact. Anomalies of this kind are ubiquitous, and in fact constitutive, of most documentary-based performance.[99] Yet, for all their incongruities, both of these plays may be regarded as critical interventions into the historiography of *tamasha* and *lavani*, and the archival praxis surrounding these subaltern forms, primarily because they broach these issues as subjects of in-depth and ongoing research; and like any other research project, they are never quite finished, opening up avenues for further inquiry, understanding, revision and reframing. While *Tichya Aaichi Goshta* is no longer in production, it continues to have a rich afterlife, through the various ancillary projects it has inspired; *Sangeet Bari* is very much an evolving enterprise, and has grown into an umbrella venture of sorts, comprising a range of *lavani*-related explorations and collaborations. In attempting to document and preserve subaltern forms like *tamasha* and *lavani* through the ephemeral medium of performance, these plays remind us of the multiple ways in which the transience of the "live" is always discursively mitigated by the persistence of the living.

[99] Alan Filewod's book-length study of documentary theatre in Canada, for instance, demonstrates how conventions of form and genre are manipulated to different ends within this kind of performance practice. See Filewod, *Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

EPILOGUE

Outtakes from the Archives

> *Within a brick-and-mortar archive, scriptive things archive the repertoire – partially and richly, with a sense of openness and flux. To read things as scripts is to coax the archive into divulging the repertoire.*
>
> - Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*[1]

As the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep across the globe in March 2020 onwards, in India, as elsewhere, performances moved online. The gamut of virtual performances ranged from recorded versions of staged performances, to digitally created videos-on-demand, to live Zoom events. At the same time, many existing archives and libraries have embarked on ambitious digitization projects, or have developed new born-digital ventures.[2] The proliferation of affordable and easy-to-use recording devices has precipitated a surge in ad-hoc oral history and documentation projects hosted on social media platforms. In this new, highly mediated environment, the gap between event and archive has all but dissolved. To elucidate with an example: among the proliferation of new interactive virtual formats, one mode that has gained traction in theatre circles is the "guided viewing," where excerpts from a previously staged

[1] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood From Slavery to Civil Rights*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 13.
[2] The National Centre for Performing Arts Library (NCPA, Mumbai) has currently in the process of digitizing its collections; Natarang Pratishthan (Ghaziabad) has now has a YouTube channel where it intermittently uploads archival footage; the Natya Shodh Sansthan (Kolkata) has recently established a social media presence, where it curates short interactive video and photographic engagements using archival materials; the Ramanath Pandit Centre for Fundamental Research in Indian Theatre (Talegaon) has proposals in the pipeline to digitize its extensive collection.

and recorded performance are played to a virtual audience, interspersed with live directorial commentary and interviews with other cast and crew members.[3] How does one classify this type of encounter? Is this a live performance event, or is it a new frontier of digital archiving?

In a sense, of course, it is both. It is tempting to think of this collapse of the gap between event and archive as an artifact of the digital era. However, performance events and archival praxis have long history of co-constitution in the modern Indian context, particularly within the field of theatre practice, as I have illustrated in this dissertation. In arguing that in the post-independence decades in India, theatre was imagined and mobilized as a crucial, but hitherto largely understudied, archival site for the preservation of subaltern "folk" forms like *tamasha,* I have drawn attention to various axes of such co-constitution. The first chapter traced how from the 1940s onwards, *tamasha* performance and preservation began to framed as law-and-order problems that had to be redressed through legal regulation. This process, facilitated a radical reimagining of the relationship between censorial intervention and cultural conservation, such that censorship was posited as a preservatory, rather than prohibitive, force. Theatre played a crucial role in executing and expanding this censorial vision, as I have demonstrated in chapter two, through the paradigmatic example of a 1965 play, *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara.* By reframing the preservation and reform of *tamasha* as a dramaturgical project, this play exerted its influence both through its live performative power, and through its articulation of a distinct archival vision, thus laying the groundwork for the appropriation of *tamasha* by educated, white collar, middle-class performers and audiences from the 1960s-1970s onwards. Such hegemonic appropriation was reified in multiple ways, but it was also resisted at an ideological and dramaturgical register, as evidenced in chapter three. Assembling three plays that stage the genealogies of caste-based

[3] At least two prominent plays have had such guided viewings in the last few months: Sunil Shanbag's 2009 production *Sex, Morality and Censorship*, and Neel Chaudhuri's 2014 production of *Still and Still Moving.*

appropriation of subaltern popular traditions like *tamasha,* this chapter foregrounded the complex ways in which theatre functions as both, a living record of invizibilized minoritarian histories, and a dynamic, ephemeral medium that makes such erasures manifest. The documentary potential (and perils) of theatre has been most directly explored in chapter four, which demonstrates how issues of cultural preservation are staked upon the bodies of women and articulated through control of female sexuality.

Such a dialogic approach towards performance and archives is critical for a number of conceptual and practical reasons. For one, the ongoing digital revolution vis-a-vis performance demands a capacious and elastic understanding of the cleavages between the live event and the record. At a more pragmatic register, such an approach is essential even to navigate institutional archives for performance, and confront issues of accessibility and organization, especially as these institutions themselves are facing obsolescence and/or decline. In concluding this dissertation, I reflect on how the thematic concepts and challenges that animate this dissertation are, in some ways, also methodological concepts and challenges that arise in the process of conducting archival research on performance-related objects. The issues that I raise across the four preceding chapters – around censorship, reform and redaction, caste-based elision, and gender and sexuality based essentializations – are mirrored in the structure, classification, composition and availability of archival materials on these subjects.

The first chapter highlights the multiple, often contradictory ways, in which the state regulation of *tamasha* was narrativized, contested and justified. These divergences are manifest in the way this censorship saga finds articulation within existing archives; which is to say, there is no cohesive account of these events, but a coherent narrative can be assembled by collating bits and fragments from various sources.[4] However, these sources are also often incommensurate,

[4] My own account of these events was assembled through archival work conducted at the NCPA, at the Ramnath Pandit Centre and at the Stage Performances Scrutiny Board office.

with major chronological and narrative discrepancies between retrospective anecdotal accounts and official records of the same events, though evidently the two are mutually "enmeshed, intertwined, and imbricated," to use Shahid Amin's phrase.[5] The seemingly paradoxical idea that censorship, in the *tamasha* case, is undergirded by a preservatory logic is also reflected in the conditions of documentation, in that the most comprehensive, linear transparently accessible records of this history are to be found not in institutional archives and libraries, but in the Stage Performances Scrutiny Board (formerly the Tamasha Censor Board) office in Mumbai. Of course, these records only represent the 'official' version of events; the implicit objectives of censorship, which in this this case, was to suppress mass political mobilization of *tamasha*, manifest as unwritten absences in the record. However, the legacies of such archival absences – which includes that which is unwritten because it is "common sense," as well as that which is unwritten "because it could not be said"[6] – persist into the present. For instance, we have seen in Chapter 1 that the foundational *raison d'etre* of the existence of the Censor Board was that it was posited as a preferable alternative and antidote to blanket bans imposed on opaque charges like obscenity. It would appear this binary logic continues to shape the vision of the Board even in its current, vastly changed, avatar. "We rarely ban on the basis of obscenity these days," the Secretary of the Scrutiny Board explained, adding that they are usually more concerned about affronts to "caste and creed."[7] But even when something is deemed controversial, instead of being banned outright, it is usually managed through an elaborate mechanism of regulatory interventions that seem to defer or dislocate the problem rather than address it directly.[8]

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[5] Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 194

[6] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 15

[7] Personal Interview with S.P. Khamkar, 5 Dec 2019.

[8] In most cases, such controversial performances are issued temporary certificate of suitability from the Board, and if there is no public backlash after the first few runs, then a permanent certificate may be issued.

These censor files attest to the expansion of the Censor Board over the decades, as it widened its regulatory domain to incorporate various genres of performance besides *tamasha*, and included more members and positions within its purview. Prima facie, these records might signify increased control and better efficiency of the Board, but in attending to archival marginalia like interdepartmental memos, dispatches, handwritten notes, it would appear that such expansion actually testifies to greater uncertainty and disorganization over the years. For the most part, the membership of the Board was appointed on a voluntary, unpaid basis, and often, assigned responsibilities were not carried out as expected, but there was no set protocol for reprimand. Laments from overworked members, complaints about unresponsive colleagues, reproach from other governmental departments, unheeded requests for replacements, and other such prosaic ephemera populate these records. Such disjunctures between prescription and practice become more discernible by reflexively occupying "the ethnographic space of the archive" which, as Ann Laura Stoler's formulation, "attends to processes of production, relations of power in which archives are produced, sequestered, and rearranged."[9]

These relations of power come into clear view in perusing the archival afterlife of Vasant Sabnis' landmark play, *Viccha Mazi Puri Kara* (1965). First of all, it is conspicuous that for a play that has such a long and vibrant life in performance, it leaves relatively few material and documentary traces. The most robust archival resource for this play are the numerous reviews, produced through course of its long history of production and adaptation. As I point out in my analysis of this play in Chapter 2, *Viccha*'s unique performative power accrued in large part from its intensely satirical meta-commentary on its own reformist project. These gambits were so meta-discursive, I argue, that they set the terms on which the play's contribution was to be evaluated. This is reflected in the content of the reviews, as well as their variety (or lack thereof),

[9] Stoler, *Along,* 37

as the extant records at the National Centre of the Performing Arts Archive attests. We know, from the author's own account, that *Viccha* was criticized for its appropriation and gentrification of *tamasha*. But these negative reviews and critiques are nowhere to be found in the extant documentary records around this play, which contain only celebratory accounts. Rather than fetishizing this absence as something that is "lost" in the archive, and can thus be "recovered," I want to point out the insular logic through which these partial archival knowledges are produced.[10] By transacting in consummate, but ultimately unquantifiable, currencies like "reform," "respectability," "middle class," and so on, the play not only actively interpellated and engendered its critical audience, but also delimited the parameters of that critical reception. The conspicuous elision of caste in the play, is thus commensurate with the elision of any (caste-based) negative critique in its archival afterlife.

In marking a methodological shift from what Anjali Arondekar designates as "archive-as-source to archive-as-subject," it becomes essential to attend to issues of form and context, such as seemingly mundane principles of administrative and logistical organization. These organizational precepts, which dictate how archives are navigated and accessed, often rely on, and reinforce essentialized categorizations of knowledge into distinct discursive domains. To elaborate, let us turn to Chapter 3, where I illustrate how one major subject of debate within Dalit theatre historiography revolves around attempts to reclaim *tamasha* as the progenitor of modern Dalit Theatre. While there are divergent positions on this matter, for a host of complex reasons that I describe in the chapter, a cursory glance at the filing system within most performance archives clarifies why such symbolic reclamation becomes necessary. The basis for this historiographical reclamation is that the artists who have developed and sustained *tamasha* over centuries are primarily from Dalit communities, *tamasha* can rightfully be claimed as a

[10] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 9.

predecessor to modern Dalit cultural production. Such ideological and demographic linkages are not manifest in the archive, because "Tamasha" and "Dalit Theatre" are catalogued and indexed in distinct "files," such that within this organizational paradigm, there is no scope for organic overlap or interconnection between the two. This might seem like a rather banal and purely logistical problem, but it is worth tracing the discursive logic through which these disjunctures are instituted. In many archives, of which the Natya Shodh in Kolkata might be considered a representative example, "Tamasha" is usually filed alongside other "folk" forms; such categorization presumes the "folk" to be a stable, cohesive umbrella category, which is not only essentializing, as I explain in the Introduction, but also recapitulates the ideological thrust of the national-global capital nexus that has funded many of these archives into existence.

Recent critical reassessments of the scope and significance of the archive probe how gender and sexuality form the (sometimes latent, sometimes apparent) fulcrum around which archival knowledge is constructed, especially within imperial contexts.[11] Such an inquiry into the myriad ways in which preservatory gestures are articulated through essentialized gendering of bodies and control of sexuality forms the basis of the last chapter of my dissertation and also opens up avenues for further research. In collating materials for Chapter 4, which centers on the figure of the female *lavani* dancer, I found that such essentializations sometimes become a methodological prerequisite for research, even if the final objective is to expose and counteract such representations. This chapter begins with an account of the proliferant genre of the hybrid *tamasha*-based play, which feature stock character of the *lavani* dancer prominently, but in stereotypical and superficial terms. These plays are not canonical or universally popular, and are thus somewhat difficult to locate and compile. While conducting research at a bountiful but impenetrable private performance archive, the Ramanath Pandit Centre for Fundamental

[11] Arondekar, *On the Record*; Stoler, *Along;* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives." *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247-72.

Research in Indian Theatre in Talegaon, which has no catalogue of the 125,000 materials in its collection, I was faced with a peculiar problem. I simply could communicate the criteria that would accurately describe this profuse but oddly specific genre, on the basis of which the assistant, the sole staff member of the archive, would then scour the shelves for relevant materials. After a long and mutually amusing process of trial-and-error, I arrived at a provisional, but ultimately effective, direction: to set aside any paperback play text that has a dancing girl on the cover. While this strategy worked for practical purposes (I was able to assemble and browse more than eighty works of this genre), it compels a deeper reckoning of the breach between process and purpose. At the risk of making too fine a point of such pragmatic negotiations, it is worth asking: what does it mean for a critique of the instrumentalization of the sexualized female body to be premised on, and reproduce, those very same instrumentalizing rubrics?

While I raise this question in the specific context of Chapter 4, it gestures toward the broader conceptual provocations of this dissertation around the ethical and aesthetic stakes of preserving seemingly immaterial forms of cultural knowledge and transmission, which often get glossed as "intangible cultural heritage." The inherent impasse here is evident even at the level of language, as Diana Taylor observes with reference to UNESCO's mandate of "safeguarding, protecting and revitalizing cultural spaces or forms of cultural expression proclaimed as 'masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.'" This formulation in terms of "masterpieces" and "heritage," Taylor points out, reiterates the categories of the material archive.[12]

Thinking beyond the logic of durable archives is vital in the present moment for a number of different reasons. For one, brick-and-mortar archives have increasingly become imperiled and outdated institutions, at least in India. At the time of this writing, we are faced

[12] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 23-4.

with the imminent demolition of the National Archives of India (New Delhi), the largest archival repository in South Asia, with no clarity on where or how the materials contained within this archive will be relocated. Similar processes are at work with respect to various performance archives in India. For instance, at the National Centre for Performing Arts, the rooms that formerly housed archival records were summarily "renovated" in 2019 to make room for office space. These old records, which are supposedly slated for digitization, now languish in an old godown on the premises. Not only are they no longer accessible for research, but these materials also have little chance of survival, given their already fragile state and the notoriously humid local Mumbai climate. Some archival records are inaccessible in both a literal and metaphorical sense, as in the case of the Ramanath Pandit Centre for Fundamental Research in Indian Theatre. In addition to the absence of any metadata or catalogue of its immense holdings, the entry and use of these collections is contingent upon the personal discretion of its lone proprietor. As the saffron color and religious iconography of the brochure evince, this is patently not a secular and inclusive institution. Even when one's relative privilege brokers access, as it did in my case, the explicit pressure to conform to an imposed hegemonic narrative of cultural supremacy makes for an extremely hostile working environment. Yet the materials themselves are rare and valuable, and since there is currently no second-level management in this archive, the future fate of these collections remains unclear. Many other existing institutional archives have likely become newly precarious in the midst of the extensive losses induced by COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the available apparatuses through which durable archives carry out their documentation and conservation projects are inadequate to the protection of "intangible" sources like performance. In fact, in many cases, like that of *lavani*, it is precisely these kinds of preservationist approaches that eventuate in processes of cultural forgetting in the first place; turning to these as tools for recovery risks furthering rather than mitigating such erasures. Many erotic *lavanis*, that were barred from the 1950s onwards by the Tamasha Censor Board, have

consequently dropped out of standard repertoires. Since these supposedly "obscene" songs mostly center on female desire and revolve around topics like menstruation, breast-feeding, and so on, there is a renewed interest in them from a revisionist feminist perspective. In 2019, as a member of a four-person team, I traveled to districts in and around Pune in Maharashtra to document (on video) the disappearing repertoires of aged *lavani* dancers who live and perform in the region. The process of coaxing memories of these forgotten erotic *lavanis* reanimated some fundamental conceptual/methodological questions: What medium could be best suited to documenting the demurrals, hesitations, elisions, improvisations, inventions and collaborations that were entailed in collectively remembering and re-performing these songs? This line of questioning derives from the contextual and conceptual contributions I have offered in *Performances of Posterity* and also signals the directions for further inquiry. While there has been an increased attention on oral narratives and "mnemonic bodily practices" as repositories of minoritarian histories, we have yet to develop a medium that captures the vitality of these sources without reproducing the stultifying logic of durable archives.[13] Inspired by Sarah Bay-Cheng's prescient call for digital historiographies through/in performance, future research on this subject might inquire into the theoretical and practical possibility of digital repertoires that could effectively represent the multidirectional and interactive entailments that constitute a performance event, while also attending to issues of access and dissemination.

[13] Soneji, Davesh, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 190.

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