

**A FOLK FORM OF MAHARASHTRA; THE  
JOURNEY OF LAVANI WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS  
ON SAWAL-JAWAB**

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Abstract

*Sawal-Jawab Lavani*, a *Maharashtrian* folk form, has been a medium of entertainment in Marathi folk culture for centuries and has evolved over the years. It has been observed that the society is aware of the many aspects of *Lavani*, but is generally interpreted as a *bai* (a woman) and her dance on a seductive composition. Although it's well received by the audience, it's the *bai* who's in demand; the society conveniently ignores the informative/intellectual aspect of *Lavani* composition, Hence, this paper attempts to provide a description and a difference in seductive *Lavani* and *Sawal Jawab Lavani*. The paper, largely based on secondary research, discusses the ethnographical emergence of the form over the years, with different stylistic changes and connotations associated with it. This paper aims to discuss and review the present status of *Sawal-Jawab Lavani* and the causes of its decline. The paper also discusses the difference between selected compositions of *Kalgi Tura* (a traditional form of composing riddles on mythical stories) and *Sawal-Jawab Lavani*. The selected compositions have been translated into English for the convenience of readers. The paper sheds light on the impact of modern mediums of entertainment on the *Sawal-Jawab Lavani*.

Introduction

The folk form is one of the prime factors that unites the people of India. Oxford bibliographies define folk culture as practices and products of relatively homogeneous and isolated small-scale social groups living in rural areas. 1

It is closely associated with traditions, historical continuity, and a sense of place and belonging. Folk culture is manifested into the music, songs and dance, stories and mythologies, architecture, clothing, food, daily practices, and social structures of a region. 2

Maharashtra owns a rich heritage of state culture and tradition which is reflected through varied folk forms. Maharashtra celebrates a variety of festivals and each festival has a meaning attached to it, from the annual Pandharpuri wari that sets out to honour lord Vithoba, to the festival Bendur that honours bullocks. These display a legacy of religious fervour that has continued for about 800 years, with a base built from the worship of saints.

The writings of the saints in Maharashtra are not just considered spiritual poems or songs. They have very high literary value. They are being performed even today after centuries by followers, and commoners, using local languages to preach, facilitating the complex spiritual teachings to reach the common man. Some of these songs are still considered literary classics even after centuries. 3 The forms which they use to propagate their message are known as Ovi and Abhanga. These are very popular folk forms close to the

hearts of commoners. Apart from that, it is seen that other folk forms like Bharud, Gondhal, Arati, etc are being used by these saints to preach to people. 4 Other folk forms include Dashavatar, Powada, Vaghya-Murali, and Lavani add glory to the Indian folk tradition. 5 Although Maharashtra possesses varieties of folk dance forms, this work predominantly focuses on Sawal-Jawab Lavani, one of the types of Lavani performance and a component of Tamasha. Efforts have been taken to delve deeper into understanding and examining the modification of Sawal-Jawab Lavani through the available literature, YouTube videos and personal communication with a few experts.

What is Lavani?

The Marathi Shabdakosh defines Lavani as “a combination of traditional song and dance, which are particularly performed to the beats of Dholki, a percussion instrument.” 6 According to A. B. Kolhatkar, “जी हृदया ला चटका ला वते ती ला वणी ”. 7 This can be loosely translated into - Lavani is that which ignites a flame of intrigue in one’s heart. The Vyutpattikoshkar defines it as a kind of rural (erotic) song. 8 Here the word rural is used in the context of geographical location, language, and the subject of Lavani.

The composers of Lavani were known as shahirs. Initially, shahirs were famous for composing Powada, the lyrics that praised and narrated battles and valorous acts of warriors. The Powada, the form of composition, predominantly elucidated valorous deeds since the time of Shivaji Maharaj.

Towards the end of Shivaji Maharaj’s era, the financial condition of the Marathas improved substantially.

The later rulers, Shahu Maharaj and Peshwa Nanasaheb appreciated and encouraged folk performing arts. This of course, gave scope to the ballad artists - shahir, bharadi and gondhali to compose considerable folk songs and execute them. These creations were based on various topics and Rasas. In the social arena, elite people's financial power and political stability enabled them to afford luxurious life and pass time by having entertainment. 9 Later, as the Maratha rulers lost grip over the rule, the court ministers/feudatories announced their independence.

The Peshwas were the Brahmin Prime Ministers to the Marathas. The first four Peshwas (Balaji Vishwanath, Baji Rao I, Balaji Bajirao and Madhavrao I) brought the Maratha army under their control and became a sovereign of the Maratha empire. In contrast to the earlier Peshwas, the Peshwa Bajirao II was more interested in dance and music. He was a patron of shahirs who composed ballads on various topics such as Hindu mythical stories, battles, heroism, political achievements, etc. He was the first Peshwa to ask shahir Honaji to compose Ragdari Shrungarik ballad (classical erotic songs). 10 As the new form of ballad attracted many shahirs, there was a competition among shahirs to compose Shrungarik ballads that would please the Peshwas and earn them royal gifts. Soon this form became popular as Lavani for very often it was a narration of women’s bodies, feelings, sexuality, and desires. 11 Thus, even though the word Lavani has been used in some of the literature of the 16th - 17th century, 12 ‘Lavani as a performing art’ flourished under the tutelage of the Peshwa reign in Maharashtra.

This new form of Lavani became so popular that it gained the status of the most engaging form of entertainment for elite people. It involved a sensual dance performance on the Ragdari Shrungarik ballads,

a young boy dancing in a woman's attire was an interesting element that helped this form to gain popularity among the masses. 13 The patrons, ministers and soldiers were more inclined towards these performances. This resulted in the Shringar Rasa dominating the other Navarasas; 14 that people believed that Lavani was nothing but erotic composition. Regrettably, the journey of the ballad cum Lavani after Peshwa Bajirao II is not comprehensible due to the scarcity of sources. However, various shahirs such as Ram Joshi, Prabhakar, Lahiri Mukunda, Gangu Haibati, Patthe Bapurao's compositions shed some light on various aspects of Lavani that evolved during the 19th Century. The ballad-Lavani artists, especially shahirs, lost the Peshwa patronage under British rule. Shahirs were left with no other source than to secure public patronage and preserve this art form as it was their sole source of income. They started their own groups which were popularly called Tamasha troupes. Unlike today, the Tamasha groups were named after the lead shahirs. This period witnessed beautiful compositions on various topics. Although the Vyutpattikoshkar (etymologist) elucidates shahirs composition as melodious, erotic, and rural, Dhond accepts the melodious aspect of the composition, however, he challenges the erotic and rural representation, as in the view of Dhond, shahir's Lavani compositions narrate life in the cities. They don't talk about villages and farms but about elite people in the cities, their affairs and their lives. Even the language used in these compositions was not rural but what was considered 'sophisticated' at the time. 15

The shahirs and their Tamasha groups were competing among themselves on their intellectual ability to compose appealing compositions to gain and retain public patronage. This soon became an interesting form or a game in which shahirs of two groups, two phads, challenged each other on the basis of knowledge and wit to assert their own dominance. This was performed in a way where one shahir posed a question/riddle and the other shahir answered it, followed up by a question of his own. The winner is the one who outsmarted the opponent. This question-answer composition of Lavani is/was known as Kalgi-Tura in spiritual performance, in the world of Tamasha it's called Sawal-Jawab Lavani and jugalbandi in classical performances.

What is *Tamasha*?

*Tamasha* is one of the prominent folk arts in Maharashtra. According to the Marathi *vyutpattikosh*, *Tamasha* is an 'entertaining visual'. 16 Burde believes that *Tamasha* is a folk art that entertains the common rural masses. 17 Nadhe on the other hand states that *Tamasha* was an entertaining and engrossing art form that over time changed into an art form that satisfied bodily desires. 18 *Tamasha* is an umbrella term that includes variety of captivating performances as follows

- *Gan* - Starting the *Tamasha* with god *Ganesh*'s invocation.
- *Gavlan* - Interesting interactions between *krshna* and *gavalanis*
- *Lavani* - Combination of traditional song and dance on the beat of *dholki*
- *Sawal-Jawab* - riddle(s)
- *Vaag* - An acted-out story/ folk tale
- *Mujra* - Concluding act after *Lavani*

*Sawal-Jawab Lavani*

*Sawal-Jawab*, often associated with *Lavani*, is one of the components of *Tamasha*. *Sawal-Jawab Lavani* is the term used in modern *Tamasha*, which has its origins in the practices of *Kalgi-Tura*. The *Kalgi-Tura* is a

musical debate cum dialogue between two parties. People refer to the term *Kalgi Tura* with various names in different regions, such as *Shiv-Shakti*, *Maya-Brahma* and *Shivdasi Haridasi*, *Sagunwad-Nirgunawad* to name a few. 19 The *shahirs*, who composed and presented *Kalgi-Tura*, referred to themselves as either 'Kalgiwale' or 'Turewale' on the basis of their religious practice. In *Kalgi-Tura* the shahirs alternatively challenge each other's knowledge, often based on puranic literature, in the form of riddles in Marathi language. The mystifying mythological *Puranic* riddles were the most intriguing component of their performances. The *Kalgi-Tura* contains descriptions in praise of the deities, the stories of *Rama*, *Krshna*, *Shiva*, and Maharashtra *Varkari*'s beloved deity Vithoba. Apart from *puranas*, the Indian epics of Mahabharata, Ramayan too had a great impact on the *Kalgi-Tura* composition 20 as the questions in these compositions were based on these epics, *Pauranic* stories, various scholarly disciplines etc. The *Kalgi-Tura* composition is as follows:-

1. दहात उठणार, दहात बसणार ही तर गोष्ट खरी

बिनबापाचा जन्म झाला. आईपण नव्हती घरी.

(It is for sure that he is reputed in a group of people, but he was borned without a father even in absence of a mother at home.)

2. शेषटीने आहार भक्षितो असा नर आहे कोणता?

(Who is the man who consumes food using his tail?)

*Kalgiwale*'s ideology is such that they believe *Prakruti* (Earth) was superior to *Dev* (Supreme God) whereas *Turewale* believe vice-versa. 21 The groups, *Kalgi* and *Tura*, identify themselves with props such as ornaments worn on their heads: *Kalgi* is something like a flower of *Tulsi*(*Manjiri*) and *Tura* is like the topmost part of a corn. 22 This performance was accompanied by instruments such as *dapha* (drum-like musical instrument), *tuntuna* (a one-stringed instrument) etc. The attire of performers consists of a colourful/designed *pheta* with their respective prop, white *dhoti*, white *sadra*, (in the case of *shahirs*) *nehru-jacket* over it, and a *shela* around their waist.

The *Kalgi-Tura* performance commences with playing *dapha* (this is to inform and invite the audience). On the dais, both parties sit opposite facing each other. Generally, *Kalgiwale* take pride in challenging the *Tura* group with a riddle. Of course, these questions challenged the wit and the knowledge of *shahirs*. This was a way for the parties to assert their intellectual and ideological dominance. The programme starts in the evening post-dinner and it would go on till either of the parties accept the defeat. Or sometimes if the party is not willing to accept the defeat, they may request the day's time and return at night to continue the earlier game. Thus it may go on for a day or some nights. Therefore, the audience is completely uncertain about the end of the programme. Interestingly, people who attend these programmes, may not be formally educated but are wise enough, as they often have the answers to the *shahir*'s intricate riddles. Sometimes attendees suggest a topic or pose a riddle to both parties on the dais and that brings more fun to the game. Generally, *Kalgi-Tura* programs are performed in *yatras* (procession around the place), after the completion of religious rituals during festivals. In Maharashtra, *Kalgi-Tura* events are held during festive seasons such as *Shimga* (*Holi*), *Nagpanchami*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Bail-pola*, etc. These events are absorbed as a mode of entertainment and education in various festive/non-festive events as well. 23 The form of

Kalgi-Tura was initially called as 'Bhedik Lavani' or 'Bhedik Kavya/Kavane' in Tamasha. The execution of Bhedik Lavani was very similar to Kalgi-Tura. 24 Kalgi-Tura was chiefly dominated by shahirs as women had never played a part in it and were not authorised to be called shahir. According to the information shared by Dr. Pujari 25 , the ballad artists believe that the form had a religious aspect associated with it, hence any woman should not be a part of it. According to them, a menstruating woman is a vitaal (वि टाळ) - an impurity that pollutes and disrespects the art and the scripture.

It has been observed that even this era was not alien to competition. Every form of entertainment and all types of entertainers were trying to retain their prime source of survival. Regrettably, available limited sources compel us to bridge the gap with probabilities. The origin of Sawal-Jawab component of Tamasha is one such example. The sources that speak about the emergence of Sawal Jawab are close to none. However, the resemblance between Kalgi-Tura/Bhedik Lavani and Sawal Jawab is evident. Kalgi-Tura was an interesting, captivating, and popular performance among the masses. Even though the contemporary folk form of Tamasha was well perceived by the people, the shahirs could not resist adopting this form of performance. So they started composing lyrics in the form of Sawal-Jawab, which was not a difficult task for them as Brahmin shahirs were familiar with Purana literature. Here, the shahir's composition introduced another type of competition among the Tamasha parties similar to Kalgi-Tura, which can be referred to as Sawal-Jawab.

Kalgi-Tura compositions have inflicting connection to the pauranic literature. With regard to Sawal-Jawab composition, it narrates puranic stories as well as addresses other subjects such as geography, relationships, feelings or even general questions on everyday practices and so on and so forth. In Sawal-Jawab performance, the shahirs have to be mindful to revert with intelligent quick witted answers. After solving the riddle, he sets an intellectual puzzle to keep the crowd entertained at the same time to maintain their upper hand in the Sawal-Jawab. The level of commitment Kalgiwale and Turewale had for their religious beliefs was to some extent destitute in modern Sawal-Jawab. Probably, Tamashakar made a successful attempt of including Kalgi-Tura, without much alteration in form, techniques and and originality, which gave them more creative opportunities and an open canvas. The execution of Sawal-Jawab is quite close to the presentation of Kalgi-Tura. With regard to instruments, Kalgi-Tura uses dapha and tuntuna, whereas Sawal Jawab includes instruments such as dholki, harmonium etc.

Here is an example of *Sawal-Jawab*:-

सवाल

रोज गर्भिता रोज प्रसवते अशी कोणती माता गं

दुग्धपान गर्भति चालते आश्चर्याची वार्तागं

(Question

Who is the mother that conceives everyday

And keeps feeding her child with surprising facts)

जबाब

रोज गर्भिता रोज प्रसवते भरते-सुटतेशाळा रं

दुग्धपान चालते वर्गसुरू ज्या वेळा

(Answer

School accommodates children like a mother who carries her child in the womb And those surprising facts are fed during the classes.)

- lyricists Shahir Kuntinath Karke

An interesting factor in this example is the use of the word 'patal' in the very first stanza. *Patal* means a *saree*, which denotes that the question was posed to a woman. This is evident that though *Kalgi-Tura* deprived of women participation, in *Sawal-Jawab* women were used as an object to perform dance and to engage audiences with their charm and beauty.

In the 20th century, Marathi cinema emerged and the masses had a new source of entertainment. Cinema/film started as a *Mukapat* in India, however, a shift from *Mukapat* to *Chitrapat* (oral tradition to filmography) brought a revolution in the world of entertainment. This was a threat to the previously existing folk entertainment forms, which were largely oral in nature. Movies can be watched anytime as they are pre-recorded, they can be re-watched whenever one desires, which was not the case with live performances of folk arts. Eventually, these movies included folk forms like Lavani and Tamasha. Famous movies like *Sawal Majha Aika!* (1964) and *Pinjra* (1972), released in the first few decades post-independence, set the pattern for the type of representative content of Tamasha and its components which would be portrayed in Marathi cinema to date.

These films initially tried to replicate the interactive form of *Sawal-Jawab* that was popular in live performances. They fell back on drawing inspiration from early *Kalgi-Turas*. However, the cinematic representation of *Kalgi-Tura* deviates from the original formats. Following is an example of what has been referred to as *Kalgi-Tura* in a famous Marathi film *Sawal Majha Aika!*:

अग, काय सामना करू तुझ्याशी नारीजात तूढबळी ग  
हुकूम पाळिता पुरुषजातीचा सरे जिंदगी सगळी ग  
बाळपणी तुज धाक पित्याचा, तरुणपणी तुला हवा पती  
'वृद्धपणा तव पुत्राहाती, स्वतंत्र बुद्धी तुला किती?

(To all the females out there, should I even bother with your opinion?)

After all, you all spend your entire lives only bowing down to the wishes of men, serving them, In childhood, you fear your father, and in youth, you need a husband

When you're old, your son speaks over you, do you even have any opinions, thoughts of your own?)

अरे नको वाढपण सांगूशाहिरा पुरुषजातीचेफुकाफुकी  
स्त्रीजातीच्या अकलेपुढती तुझी बढाई पडंल फिकी  
सावित्रीच्या चतुरपणाने यमधर्माला दिला धडा  
असेल ठावी कथा जरी ती, बोल मज पुढे धडाधडा !

(Oh shahir, don't toot your own horn and belittle these females,

For your boasting pales in front of the intellect displayed by these females

Savitri outwitted Yama afterall

Do you know this tale? If so, tell me!)

अग तूच सांग ग, कोणासाठी सावित्री तेदिव्य करी.  
सावित्रीची कथा सांगतेपुरुषप्रीतीची मातबरी!

पतीवाचुनी कसे जगावेहाच तिथेला प्रश्न पडे  
इथेच ठरला पुरुष श्रेष्ठ गे चतुर सारिके बोल पुढे !

(You tell me, for whom did she do all of this?)

The story shows the extent a woman would go for the man she loves!

She didn't know how to live without her husband

This in itself proves the man's superiority, what do you have to say on that?)

पुरुषावाचून जन्मेनारी या पृथ्वीचा कोण पती?

पित्यावाचुनी जन्मा आली काय थांबली तिची गती?

(A woman born without a man (sperm), who is the husband of the earth?

Has being born without a father ever stepped on her momentum?)

This is shown as an interaction between a woman and a man. Its content largely adheres to the same themes and ideas followed originally, falls on similar lines to *Kalgi-Tura*, with reference to the presented conflict, and is about superiority between men and women. But unlike *Kalgi-Tura*, the interaction is between a man and a woman. The cinematic representation of various components in *Tamasha* is inaccurate and changed heavily to make the cinema more attractive and entertaining. Another example can be the *Sawal-Jawab* depicted in the latest Marathi movie including *Tamasha* and its components, *Chandramukhi* (2022). This entire *Sawal-Jawab* is among two women and is presented as a *Lavani* where both the women have danced along with singing the *Sawal-Jawab Lavani*.

सवाल- 1

नर नारीचेमिलन घडता

जीव नवा ये जन्माला

तिन्हीत्रिकाळी सत्य असेहे

ठाऊक अवघ्या जगताला ||

अगं सांग तु ऐशा मिलनाविना

जन्म कुणाचा झाला गं

अन कुणा नारीनं कसा अन कधी

चमत्कार हा केला गं ||

(Question 1

It is the union of a man and a woman

That brings new life to the world

This is the ultimate truth,

Known by the world.

Oh, tell me, without this union

Has anyone ever been born

If yes, how and when and by whom

was this miracle done?)

जवाब -1

अहो नसेनारी ती ऐरी गैरी

आदीशक्ती ह्या जगती गं  
सांब शिवाची अर्धांगी तीज  
माय पार्वती म्हणती गं ||

(Answer 1

Oh, that's not nobody

It is a divine power in the world

Wife of the great Shiva

It's our mother Parvati)

अहो अंग मलातून बालक रचिला

चमत्कार तो गणपती

अन त्याच गणाची आज थोरवी

का र्या रंभी गा ती गं || 37

(Oh, a child made out of sediments of her skin, The miracle is the Ganpati And today, we sing his praises  
Before we start anything)

## Conclusion

This study was undertaken to analyse the *Sawal-Jawab*, a form of *Lavani*, in *Tamasha*. Even though *Sawal-Jawab* has its roots embedded in *Kalgi-Tura*, one cannot use both the art forms interchangeably. The existence of *Sawal-Jawab* can be seen based on various topics and are not limited and focused to one certain element. The discussion on the available data has attempted, as far as possible, to understand the past and present status of the form. The audience was attracted to *Tamasha-Lavani* which challenged *Kalgi-Tura*. India's first feature film *Raja Harishchandra* by Dadasaheb Phalke in 1913 set a challenge for *Kalgi-Tura* and *Tamasha* performers for the simple reason that it was new to the market at the time and definitely gained a lot of popularity leading to people losing their interest in *Kalgi-Tura* as well as *Sawal-Jawab*. Although *Kalgi-Tura* is still practised in remote places of rural Maharashtra, their existence and information is not easily accessible as it was during its heydays.

In the 19th and initial years of the 20th century, the compositions and the execution of *Tamasha*, predominantly was the men's forte. The audience's demand and acceptance of a 'bai' opened a new avenue for women's employment. Gradually, the form transformed completely into women overtaking the role of shahirs as depicted in the 60s- 70s popular Marathi movies such as *Sawal Majha Aaika!*, *Pinjra*, *Sangte Aika* (1959) etc. Even the most recent movie *Chandramukhi* depicts the duet *Sawal-Jawab* among two women performers without casting a man, *shahir*, traditional lyricist of *Sawal-Jawab*. Regrettably, the present *Tamasha phads* are not convinced or willing to continue the form in their ongoing performances. The reason could be that *Sawal-Jawab* performance is not time-bound and people, nowadays, prefer to have short and crisp events as a result the traditional lengthy compositions are reduced to maximum two to four *Sawal-Jawabs*. With regard to Hindi cinema, the *Lavani* has been considered or has remained as a form of an item-song. According to our study, even though some Marathi movies are showcasing *Sawal-Jawab Lavani*, the form is on its deathbed.

## End Notes

1. Revill, George, &quot;Folk Culture and Geography.&quot; Oxford Bibliographies, 25 Feb. 2014,



www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199874002/obo-9780199874002-0092.xml. 2.

www.varsitytutors.com/ap\_human\_geography-help/popular-folk-culture. source:

ecoursesonline.iasri.res.in/mod/page/view.php?id=80877.

3. www.maharashtratourism.gov.in/about-maharashtra

4. Ibid.

5. Op.cit., Refer to endnote no.2

6. ShabdKosh.com. &quot;ला वणी - Meaning in English.&quot; English Hindi Dictionary | अंग्रेज़ी हिन्दी शब्दकोश - ShabdKosh,

7. गा यकवा ड, मि रदेव, मरा ठी ला वणी : नि मि ती आणि स्वरूप, नवी न उद्योग प्रकाशक, पुणे, ३० सुधारित आवृत्ती, ऑक्टोबर २००२.

8. धोंड, मधुकर, मन्हा टी ला वणी, मौज प्रकाशन, पहिली आवृत्ती १५ ऑगस्ट १९५६, चौथी आवृत्ती, मुंबई ०४, जानेवारी २०१३.

9. Ibid., pp. 60-61

10. Ibid., p. 62

11. Ibid., p. 63

12. A Note: A poem by Manmathshivalinga, a shahir (poet), has been found in the manuscript collection of Pune's Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal. M.M. Potdar published it under the title The Lavani of the Bhavani Goddess of Karad in 1915, in the annual publication of the Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal.

Manmathshivalinga was born in 1560 and died in 1613. Thus, this Lavani was composed at some point in the interim. According to Gangadhar Morje, a senior folk-art scholar, the composition takes the form of a folk song and perfectly matches the metaphorical Lavanis of today. Thus, we can conclude that Manmathshivalinga's Lavani must be the oldest in existence. -

Khedlekar, Santosh, Lavani Through the Ages in Pune, Nov. 2021

map.sahapedia.org/article/Lavanithrough%20the%20Ages%20in%20Pune/6195.

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19. धोंड, op.cit., p. 265

20. A Note: The following is an example of Kalgi Tura inspired by Mahabharata: "हरि रूक्मिणीचापतीझाला अर्जुनाला सारथी। हाती धरला बागदोरकी सारंधर वाच्याच्या म्होरारथ फिरवती॥

पांची पांडवांकराणहिं डेवणवण जाहले हैरण पाहून भक्ती। धावा धुरपती हे करी

दुःशासन वैरी फेडिती। मिरी वस्त्र पुरविती॥"

Source: Manuscripts of Karale Sakharam by Dhondiram Wadkar. वाडकर, धोंडीराम, p. 75 21.

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