

National Labour Institute

Oral History Project

Cassette No 11

Madhukar Nerale: 57 years old, owner of Hanuman theatre, Lalbag, producer of tamashas. The tamashas were organised on a contractor system. The tamasha is the most popular cultural form in Maharashtra. It appeals to all strata of society. It was a complex mixture of many forms and is distinctive in its lack of any religious content or connotation. Nor was it associated with any religious function or ritual. The Ghats were the birthplace of the famous 'tamasha'. This is a composite form consisting of 'ganagawlan' (Krishna's teasing pranks on the 'gopis' or milkmaids), sangeet bari (song and/or dance sequence performed by women, either sitting or dancing). This composed the first part. The second is almost entirely given up to the wagh (skit, which is the narrative). The skit was perhaps influenced by the dashavatari (from the Konkan) form. The origin of the robust and erotic form 'lavni' which was the most important part of the tamasha, was originally the dance performed for the entertainment of the soldiers and dated back to the 17th century, which is when it took its present form. The tamasha came to the mill area through the workers who came from the Ghat- Sangli Satara, Kolhapur etc. and became one of the most popular folk forms in the city.

' My family came to Bombay when I was a baby. It was easy to get a place to stay then. My father started to sell vegetables. He would buy vegetables from the wholesale market at Byculla and sell in retail at Lalbaug. His was the only retail vegetable stall from Lalbag to Dadar. My grandmother used to help him in the business. Our customers were mostly workers, so the kind of vegetables that he sold were those that workers ate.

I could study only upto the 8th standard, because there was not much money.

Mills were the hub around which the life of the community revolved. The siren told us the time, we didn't need to check a watch. I used to wake up at 6am and when the siren sounded at 7 am I would rush to school. I remember once as people were in the process of getting ready to go to work, just before the siren, the Lalbag gas turbine burst and a huge ball of fire flew up into the

sky and dropped into the ocean. People immediately left everything and went to the aid of those who were hurt. I remember many had their skin burnt off. The community bonds were close and strong.

A friend of my father's came to my father with the suggestion that they should organise tamasha programs on contract. Where this Hanuman theatre stands now, there was a vegetable farm. There was only jungle around that, no industries or anything. My father took this place on rent. There were many bullock carts in those days, in 1946 which were used to ferry goods. My father didn't have money to buy bamboos, thatch and metal sheets. So he put up a cloth tent supported by bullock carts That was our theatre. There were 19 tamasha theatres in Bombay, and the big contractors were Bangdiwala Sheth and Abdul Rehman Sheth. The cinema theatres you see in Kamatipura now were all tamasha theatres in those days. Abdul Rehman Sheth bought up the whole of Batatyachi Chawl so that his artistes could live there. The working class families loved tamashas. Cinema was more a middle class medium.

Bangdiwala Sheth was rich enough to take out a silver 'tabut' during Mohurrum, but he was a big hearted man. When the collections came in all of it would be dumped into a box on which he would sit. When the artistes came to take money for their fees he would dip his hand into the box and take out money; and give it to them without even bothering to count it.

There were shahirs then like Shahir Amar Sheikh, Gavankar and Anna Bhau Sathe who were in the communist party and they did much to propagate the party's politics amongst ordinary people. Songs like Anna Bhau Sathe's '*majhi maina gavavar rahili, majha jeevachi hotiya kahili.* (my beloved is left behind in our village and my heart burns for her) were popular because so many young workers were here alone and lonely, and they responded to the song. There were also many songs they wrote spontaneously on the problems of the workers who lived here, and on political issues. They were fired with the need to organise and mobilise people. The communists were able to reach workers this way; but the socialists, they also had their writers and poets but they did not address the basic problems of the workers. They were more into sermonising on moral and ethical issues.

The shahirs of Girangaon played an important role in all the political movements like Independence and Samyukta Maharashtra, especially the latter. This movement received an impetus due to the shahirs and poets. The poets would write and the bards would sing. Anna Bhau

Sathe's song called 'Mumbaichi lavni' describing Bombay of those days was very famous. Pathe Bapurao had also written a song about Bombay but he described the Bombay of pre-Independence days. Annabhau wrote about the workers' Bombay.

The working class like light entertainment which does not strain the mind too much, while the middle class listen to classical music, they read books etc.. Workers favoured 'lok sangeet' while middle class people like 'natya sangeet'. Our theatre had nothing to do with any movements- it was purely light entertainment. The audience were mostly workers; when it was performed for the middle class it would be done differently- it was called 'baithakichi tamasha' in which the artiste sat down and sang, while the other usual one was called 'bahurangi tamasha' which had more songs and dances and dialogue. This form was most popular in the rural areas. There was a lot of ad-libbing and there was hardly any written script. For instance if it was a story of Harishchandra, the performer would know about the character so he would just improvise. So would Taramati because the actress would know how that character would respond to what Harishchandra was saying. There would be topical comments; the language and the lyrics were colloquial. The music was folk music. Earlier the system was for tamashas to be performed in open spaces during religious fairs and festivals. In Western Maharashtra. The elite in the villages like the Brahmins and traders and government officials hardly went to watch the tamashas there. The village would give 'supari'(betel-nuts) and a coconut to the tamasha party and that was the advance for the contract. The contractors came in later and became middlemen especially for the town performances.

The mill workers loved theatre. In the early days they were mostly from Konkan. They had little land and there was no employment either so their links with Bombay were close. Almost the whole family would be forced to migrate to Bombay. They formed their own groups to perform plays, which focused on various issues in workers' lives. The local Konkan form was 'dashavatar' which was closer to theatre. It would be based on epics and other popular folk lore which was familiar and part of our cultural heritage. Unlike in the tamasha male played the female roles. Even today it is mostly performed that way. Many legendary singers in Maharashtra like Bal Gandharva became famous for their female impersonations. Later after the advent of cinema, when the theatre went into a slump, women came in.

What was called dashavatar in South Konkan, was called naman in the North. In the Rajapur (Central?) part it was known as khele, but there was very little difference in the actual form. It is a

narrative form. There was a kind of tamasha in the north part of Konkan which was called 'gammat'. They would also perform 'jakhadi' or balyadance as it is known in Bombay, a group dance, where they would tie one set of ankle bells to the foot and dance in a circle. The last became most popular in the mill areas.

The people of Konkan brought these forms to Bombay. Dashavatar parties would be invited to Bombay and they would stay for a week or two during festivals like Holi or Diwali and there would perform every day. The form in the 'ghat' which was narrative like the dashavatar were the 'Vaghya Murali' 'Gondal or Bharood and Lalit. These troupes were also invited from the villages for pujas, naming ceremony etc. The areas in the Girangaon where the people of Konkan and Desh stayed were separate and distinct. The forms and performances were also therefore dependent on the area.

There were many bhajan mandals. There would be night long bhajan competitions. There was no need to take police permissions to put up performances then. Nor was there any danger to audiences returning home late in the night.

In Hanuman theatre we only held tamasha performances. Nothing else. The audiences consisted mostly of men from the ghat.. Some Konkani men would drop by just to see what it was like. Our tamashas would have as many as 10 or 12 groups or parties, called 'bari's. They would be identified by the main dancer, for instance Yamunabai Vaikar or Shevantabai Jejurikar- both women were famous tamasha artistes. The performances would go on from 8 in the evening to 4 in the morning when Bombay was already waking up. On holidays workers would queue up from 6 pm onwards sometimes even without having dinner. Or else they would eat early by 4pm. Our tamashas were on throughout the year, whereas dashavatari and naman would come only during festival seasons.

Women never attended. One reason was that most of the men were here without their wives who would be in the villages. In the villages women would also attend but very few, because there were very few avenues of entertainment. Besides there would be women attending the fairs where the performances were held. Then, there are many items in one tamasha performance. One was the sangeet bari where there would be the system of what is called daulatjada. In this members of the audience would proffer a coin and request a particular song or dance. The artiste would perform that number and then she would take the coin from the man.

The form of Loknatya was brought in by Annabhau Sathe and Amar Sheikh. It was a combination of tamasha and theatre. Loknatya means peoples' theatre. That is why they used a popular form like tamasha. They would address social and political themes through this form. Writers like Acharya Atrre or Narayan Surve wrote Loknatyas and they were performed by Amar Sheikh and others. He was a great performer. When he went on the stage this ordinary mortal became like a ball of fire in which everyone would be turned to ashes. These were not professionals like the other parties. They would not demand big sums of money. There were women taking part in these performances. They were party activists- both socialist and communist- from middle class backgrounds. Dada Kondke who became famous later in cinema was from Girangaon. He used the form of Loknatya in his 'Vichcha majhi puri kara'. Cinema adopted and appropriated the tamasha form. Nilu Phule who was part of the socialist movement, used the form of in his 'Katha akalechya kandyachchi'. He used political satire to discuss political issues. In the 70's and '80's the Loknatya was still popular but now it has declined.

Now there are hardly any mills running and very few textile workers. The mathadi workers (loaders) have all gone to New Bombay. There still are people from ghat in South Bombay, in transport and coolie work. The state government built the Rang Bhavan an open air theatre in South Bombay. There used to be tamashas and plays performed there, starting late in the night when these workers get free. Then some people objected to the sound and there was a court order to restrict the timing of the performances. Tamashas are not noisy. Jazz and rock are much louder. But the court brought a blanket ban on performances late in the night. Naturally there is no way to perform tamashas or Loknatyas there any more.

So our audiences have almost become extinct. The tamasha artistes are unable to survive. This artistic tradition is likely to die out. The younger leaders of the political parties are inimical to these art forms. They have no concern. Even the maidans which were available to us are no longer available. There is no patronage either from movements or from the state, and the only live entertainment is orchestra in this area. The Sena government which talks of Marathi culture should have gone to court against the order but they never did. They never held tamasha or folk festivals to encourage Marathi folk forms.

We as artistes also have to adapt new forms, keeping what is important which appeal to people. We have to create new tastes also among people. Bring in expression and literary merit. Instead

of filling our plates with 50 items we should restrict the number of those items, keeping only what is appetising.

I am now organising tamasha workshops for young people. I familiarise them with tamasha and I call well known tamasha women artistes, and I am realising that there is still so much strength in this traditional form.