

The hegemonic appropriation of sexuality: The case of the *lavani* performers of Maharashtra

Sharmila Rege

I *Introduction*

*Lavani*¹ is popularly understood to be a kind of rural erotic song in the *shahiri* or folk genre of Maharashtra. The *shahiri* tradition includes: (a) the *lavani* in its different forms, depicting the spiritual, legendary, mystical and erotic; and (b) the *powada* or ballad which depicts the ethos of courage and bravery (Dhond 1988). The earliest traceable *lavani* is of the spiritual kind and dates back to the 17th century (Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal [BISM] collection no. 311 [5]). As many as 300 *powadas* of the early Maratha period (1640–1700) have been traced, while only three compositions of the period have been categorised as *lavani* (BISM, collection no. 286). The *shringarik* or erotic *lavani*, with explicit descriptions of the sexual, have been traced back to the later Peshwa period (1796–1818), and their roots to the *Gathasatsai*—a collection of Prakrit verses, dated between the 1st and 7th centuries AD, describing the everyday life practices of the *prakritjan* or plebeians (Morje 1974: 49)—and to the *domb* and *matangi geets*, performed by lower caste women, which have been mentioned in the *Kavyanushana* (12th century) and the *Dyananeshwari* (13th century)

Sharmila Rege is at the Women's Studies Centre, Department of Sociology, University of Poona, Ganeshkhind, Pune 411 007, India.

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¹ There exists a rich body of commentary on the *lavani* of Maharashtra; see particularly Advant (1955); Badhe (1958); Bhalerao (1962); Dhere (1971); Garge (1955); Hastak (1962); and Shelke (1968).

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(Dhond 1988: 262). A significant observation that emerges from these references is that the erotic verses from the *Gathasatsai* imply the expression of sexual desire in everyday life experiences (Joglekar 1956: Verse 344), while the verse from the *Dyananeshwari* describing the performance of erotic songs by lower caste women implies that these performances had the explicit aim of provoking men into handing over their wealth ('*Tamas daan*', quoted in Dhond [1988: 262]), suggesting thereby that these performances had entered the realm of exchange. However, it is difficult to arrive at any conclusion regarding the origins of the erotic or *shringarik lavani*.

The official records of the Peshwas bear testimony to the rewards received at the court by the composers of erotic *lavani* (Oturkar 1950). In the descriptions of the competitions between the different *lavani* composers and their troupes, there are no references to female *lavani* performers; only a single reference to a female music composer of *lavani* is found (Shaligram 1908: 119). It is only in the late Peshwa period (1796–1818) that clear references are made to the female performance of *shringarik lavani* in the *tamasha* or folk theatre troupes (Kelkar 1956: 235). The *tamasha* characteristically began with a *gan* (a devotional offering to Lord Ganesha) and a *gavalan* (a comical act performed by the 'effeminate' male artists through exaggerated feminine gestures). This was followed by the female performance of the *shringarik lavani* and the *mujra* or collection of rewards (Morje 1974: 52). (The *vag* or spontaneous folk theatre in the *tamasha* is a later addition.) In short, the female articulation of female desire as constructed through the male gaze emerged only in the later Peshwa period, and has since then undergone several changes in form and content.

What sense is one to make of this form that articulates female desire in explicit sexual terms, that is composed almost entirely by males and that is performed by women before an almost entirely male audience, the elite among whom may bid for the sexual services of the female performers?

Feminist explorations of the *thumri*, which is also an articulation of female desire in the male gaze, have characterised it as a 'feminine form' because of its interrogative and subversive qualities (Rao 1990). In a similar vein, an evocative study of the courtesans of Lucknow has viewed the *kotha* as a lifestyle of 'resistance' that mocks and inverts the hegemonic construction of gender ideology (Oldenburg 1991). The *lavani*, by contrast, is a public performance (as against the exclusive performance of *thumri*, for instance), and comes closer to the *nautanki* in that the performers are generally of the Untouchable castes, the female performers being seen as no better than prostitutes (Hansen 1983). Viewed within the overall perspective of the intersection of caste and gender, the present paper argues that the *shringarik lavani* became one of the modes of constructing the bodies of lower caste women as constantly either arousing, or satiating,

male desire. This construction was crucial to the pre-colonial Peshwa state's appropriation of the labour of lower caste women through the institution of slavery. With the embourgeoisement that followed the establishment of colonial domination in Maharashtra, the *tamasha* of the Mahar and Mang castes began to centre around the *vag* or spontaneous folk theatre, thereby marginalising the performance of the *shringarik lavani*. New kinds of troupes emerged, composed of women of the Kolhati caste and devoted to the performance of the *lavani*. These troupes, known as *sangeet barees*, soon came to be labelled as obscene and immoral.

With increasing competition from the Hindi cinema, the Marathi 'talkies' adopted the *tamasha* genre (Bhagwat 1977: 315), thereby leading to a process of what I have termed the 'drain of sexuality' of the Kolhati women performers. The appropriation and transformation of the *tamasha* genre by the bourgeois Marathi theatre went unrecognised (Bhagat 1992: 85), while the use of the genre for new political purposes overlooked the gender dimension.

While there have been some feminist explorations of the Marathi theatre (for instance, Adharkar 1991), the life histories of the *tamasha* and *sangeet baree* performers have remained largely invisible. A recent theatrical presentation² of such life histories, highlighting the 'resistance' of these female artistes (Deshpande 1994), marks the beginning of feminist inquiries in this area and provides a base for a critical inquiry into the caste and gender complexities underlying the erotic *lavani* genre in Maharashtra.

II

The pre-colonial period: The lavani of insatiable female desire and the enslavement of lower caste women

'*Lavani va bai chya nadane Peshwaae budalee*' ('The downfall of Peshwa rule was brought by indulgence in women and *lavani*') is a popular saying in Marathi, closely linked to the colonial stereotype of the moral decadence of Orientals. The erotic *lavani* were constructions of lower caste women's sexuality by a decadent, feudal, Brahmanical patriarchy which simultaneously appropriated the sexual and productive labour of lower caste women through the institution of slavery.

The reign of Peshwa Bajirao II (1796–1818) saw the pauperisation and indebtedness of the peasantry (Kumar 1982: 182), and one of the worst famines in history, the famine of 1803. Describing the indebtedness and famines, Banaji writes:

² Ms. Sushma Deshpande has recently presented the life stories of three generations of *sangeet baree* dancers through an experiment in intimate theatre. Several details about the lifestyles of the *nachees* referred to in this paper are owed to Ms. Deshpande's extensive work with the *sangeet baree* artistes over the last decade.

Mothers sold their children and themselves to escape perishing, young women gave themselves up to prostitution, lived as mistresses with strangers and abandoned themselves to the guidance of procurers who considered them as their property though possessed of no legal right (Gavli 1981a: 20).

Indebtedness and famines had led to an increase in the sale of women of the lower castes. A prominent feature of the slavery of the later Peshwa period was the predominance of female slaves.³ Even under normal circumstances the government's involvement in the trade of female slaves was an important source of state revenue. Given the extravagances of the last Peshwa,⁴ it can be surmised that when the state found revenue recovery difficult under famine conditions, much of the required revenue was raised by the trade in female slaves. Conventionally, the two major means of procuring slaves were: (a) abduction in wars; and (b) charging lower caste women with adultery and then enslaving them. Since Bajirao II did not wage even a single war, the latter would seem to have been the major mode of the enslavement of women. Female adulteresses arrested as slaves of the government came mainly from the lower castes, since upper caste adulteresses were punished by excommunication from their caste. The Peshwa government levied a purchase tax from private buyers of slaves (Oturkar 1950). Absconding slaves were arrested and forced into becoming government slaves. In the absence of a slave market, the dealings were in all probability mainly through the Peshwa government (Gavli 1981a: 21).

Female slaves were employed in the courts, *natakshalas* (dancing houses) and other departments of the Peshwa state. They were employed in homes, stables, granaries, cattle houses, dancing houses, stores, communication and construction works (Gavli 1981a). The Peshwa government often gave some of these women to officials in lieu of their salary. There is evidence to suggest that the English, the French and the Portuguese also bought female slaves at prices ranging from Rs. 65 to Rs. 250 (Bhave 1976: 242). It emerges, therefore, that the sale of women of the lower castes was necessary for the later Peshwa state both for the revenue from taxes levied and for the labour of these women in the different *karkhanas* of the Peshwa government.

It is within this context that we analyse the *Andharatlya lavanya* (*lavanis* for darkness), a collection of erotic/*shringarik* *lavanis* composed during the later Peshwa period (1774–1850). It is particularly noteworthy that three of

³ Out of ninety records available only six refer to male slaves (Fukazawa 1991: 114). For further details on the position of women and slavery under the Peshwa rule, see Crawford (1857) and Deshmukh (1973).

⁴ For instance, in the period 1805 to 1809, Rs. 13,000 was spent on *bada khana* (feasts). At Bajirao's fourth marriage, Rs. 26,000 was distributed in charity, and thousands of rupees in *vilas* (merry-making) (see Valimbe 1962: 28).

the major composers, Prabhakar, Ram Joshi, and Anant Phandi were Brahmins, while Honaji Bala (whose compositions are even today sung every morning in many Maharashtrian homes) and Parsharam were from the Gavli (Cowherd) and Shimpi (Tailor) castes respectively.

The erotic *lavanis* composed during this period fall into two broad categories: (a) those that depict the *shringar* of the other-worldly kind (i.e., of Radha–Krishna and the *gopis*); and (b) those that are woven around the *shringar* of the this-worldly kind (i.e., between men and women). These *lavanis* superficially convey an impression of an overtly expressed female sexuality, but further analysis reveals that these *lavanis* endorsed the dichotomy of the *bateek* (whore) versus the *soubhagyavati* (wife). That is, the *lavanis* that overtly express the insatiable desires of women are composed in the voice of the lower caste whore, while those that express *virah* (the pain of separation) are composed in the voice of the wife. The *bateek* in the *lavani* literature expresses her intense need for bodily fulfilment, asking the man to take her as his right, just as he would his wife. She pleads with the man to come to her regularly and give her pleasure, as she would give him. She even expresses her desire to watch the *asanas* (postures) of intercourse in the mirror (Kelkar 1956: 18). On the other hand, the ‘wife’ in the *lavani* literature takes pride in the manhood of her husband, his virility, his excessive, sometimes perverted, desires. Her own desire is expressed only through *virah* (pain of separation), which may be on account of her menstrual segregation, the presence of elders in the family or the husband being away at war or on business. There is a predominance of pleas to the husband to take her in her fertile period, on the fifth day of menstruation. The virility of the husband is glorified and described as being such that only a whore could satisfy him. The wife’s expressions of displeasure at the husband’s demand for intercourse several times in a night and her use of pregnancy or menstruation as an excuse for avoiding intercourse are yet other ways of glorifying the husband’s virility (ibid.: 41, 141, 155, 165, 177, 178, 189, 249). A few *lavanis* even ventilate complaints against an inadequately endowed or impotent husband, such compositions being the wife’s expression of woe at not attaining motherhood (ibid.: 102, 104). There are also a few *lavanis* portraying adulterous wives who invite their lovers and promise them pleasures, but only if they undertake to be careful in intercourse so as to avoid conception (ibid.: 112).

The female slaves of the Peshwa state seem to fall into two categories: (a) *kunbinis* (bought for domestic and agricultural labour); and (b) *bateeks* (bought for their sexual labour, either by individuals or for the *natakshalas* or dancing houses of the state). The *kunbinis* who performed domestic labour could not have been from the *ati-Shudra* castes, while the *bateek* came from both the Shudra and *ati-Shudra* castes. Road building and ammunition work both required labour and there are records of the Peshwa Daftar (now at an archive in Pune) which imply that *kunbinis* who had illicit

relations outside of caste were to be banished to do such work (Gavli 1981a: 37). All this implies that adultery was the major ground on which the sexual and productive labour of lower caste women was appropriated. The *lavanis*' construction of the sexually insatiable and inherently adulterous lower caste woman provided the ideological justification of her enslavement in the late medieval Maratha period.

The *lavani* genre moved from private performances in *natakshalas* to public performances at the court of Bajirao II (1774–1818), when they reached the peak of their popularity. These public performances were called *lavani tamashas* and had an all-male audience (Morje 1974: 52). The most erotic of them was performed on the eve of Holi (Kelkar 1956). But as the Peshwa rule came to an end with Peshwa Bajirao's surrender to the British at Vasai (1818), the *tamasha* was forced to seek new sources of patronage. By the 1840s the *lavani tamasha* had shifted to the rural areas and most of the composers of the *lavani* of this period were from the lower castes, especially the Mahar and Mang castes.

III

The colonial period: The changing character of lavani tamasha and the emergence of the sangeet baree

Many of the *lavani* composers and their troupes moved to the princely state of Baroda in search of patronage. The troupes that stayed back in Maharashtra were at the mercy of the *zamindars*, *inamdars* and *jagirdars* (Vhatkar 1970: 29). By the mid-18th century, market forces had become entrenched in Indian agriculture and there was substantial increase in the acreage under cotton, poppy and sugarcane. By the 1850s substantial land alienation had already occurred; the Deccan riots of 1875 stand evidence to this (Dhanagare 1983). Already by the middle of the 18th century, British goods had appeared in the markets (Kumar 1982). Simultaneously, the traditional crafts were facing a decline as the paper, silk and textile industries of Poona, Yeola and Sashti faced setbacks. These major changes in the Deccan and western India had led to the emergence of two new social categories, the middlemen and the middle classes, both of which affected the face of the *lavani tamasha* and its construction of female sexuality.

The first Marathi play was written and presented by Vishnudas Bhawe at the court of the Raja of Sangli. This play came to be popular among the audiences of Bombay and Pune (Bhagwat 1977: 260). With this, the middle class, upper caste theatre was placed in opposition to the folk *tamasha*:

Bhawe's plays are of native origin, from the early classic dramas of Hindoosthan. They are void of *everything approaching licentiousness and indecorum and are images of the moralities in which the Christian*

Church in older times used to rejoice (Bombay Times, Tuesday, 8 March 1853; emphasis added).

Though the classical drama co-opted the folk forms, it was portrayed as 'moral' whereas the *tamasha* (folk theatre) and its *lavani* were condemned as licentious and immoral. The female roles in the plays were performed by males dressed as females. The patrons of the theatre were the new, Western-educated middle classes, modelling themselves on the lifestyles of the British officers. Between 1860 and 1880, several English and Sanskrit plays were translated into Marathi. The *nachee* (dancing girl)/*nartaki* (dancer), *tamasgir* (performer)/*kalakaar* (artist) dichotomies intensified as the upper castes displaced the lower castes from their hereditary sphere of the performing arts. The popularity of the Marathi theatre led to the emergence of the *vag* or the spontaneous theatre in the *tamasha*. In a performance of eight hours, six hours came to be dedicated to the *vag*, thereby resulting in the marginalisation of the performance of the *shringarik lavani* (Vhatkar 1970: 111). The period between 1900 and 1930 is reckoned as the golden period of the *tamasha* (Paranjpye 1982: 232), and is marked by the popularity of the *vags*.

The earliest record of women performers in the history of Marathi theatre is from 1865; from the names of the artistes it is apparent that they are lower caste women from the *tamasha* (Adharkar 1991: 87). These women started theatre companies in which women enacted both male and female roles. These roles were severely criticised and ridiculed by the Marathi theatre (Kanekar 1944). It is possible that the *sangeet barees* that emerged in the early 1900s were offshoots of these companies. Broadly, two types of *tamashas* emerged: (a) the *dholki-phad tamasha*, to which the *vag* was central; and (b) the *sangeet barees*, in which the performance of the *lavani* was crucial.

The *sangeet baree* troupes were formed by women of the Kolhati caste. The Kolhati women are known to be the bread-winners of their families, dancing and prostitution being their caste-based profession. These women were also known for their knowledge of cures for sexually transmitted diseases and impotency (Atre 1915: 244). The *sangeet baree* performance included a *lavani* each of the *ada* (expressive), *baleghati* (emotional) and *chhakkad* (erotic) modes. An important part of the *sangeet baree* is the *daulat jadda* or bidding by the audience for the *nachee* (dancer) to perform a *lavani* of their choice.

As against the *dholki-phad tamasha*, managed by men, the schedule of the *sangeet baree* troupe, the planning of its performances, and its finances have always been managed by the Kolhati women. Kolhati women of the *sangeet barees* do not marry, while the women in the *dholki-phad tamasha* are most often married to troupe members, and away from the stage are

subjected to the usual patriarchal controls by their families. The *dholki-phad tamasha* troupes look down upon the *sangeet barees* as being immoral and as not representative of the true *tamasha* tradition.⁵

The *tamashas* and *sangeet barees* were in demand during the *urs* and *jatras* (local religious fairs), and were on the move throughout the year except during the monsoons. They accepted *suparees* (ritualised invitations) directly from the village headmen. But in the early 1900s, as the *tamasha* theatres came up in Bombay and Pune, a contract system emerged. The theatre-owners became middlemen employing the troupe members on salaries or against an advance payment (Paranjpye 1982: 244). *Tamasha* theatres also organised private *baithaks* or performances, and the contractors began to regulate the audiences of these performances, selecting the wealthy among them to become regular clients.

There is in fact a chain: (a) the Victorian theatre emerges as the epitome of civilised culture as against the licentious and immoral folk forms of the natives; (b) the Marathi theatre emerges in emulation of the Victorian theatre; (c) with the labelling of the *tamasha* folk theatre as obscene and indecent, the *tamasha* in turn desexualises its *nachees*, and constitutes the *vag* form as superior to the *sangeet barees* of the Kolhati women who perform the erotic *lavanis* and whose sexual labour is sold to the highest bidder by the contractors. Thus, while the upper caste urban theatre emerges as moral and decent through the Victorian desexualisation of women, the Kolhati women are increasingly alienated from their creativity (the dance form and knowledge of medicines) and from their sexual labour (the contractor now appropriates their sexual labour), while in a process of resexualisation, what is sexually desirable to the audience comes to be dictated by these contractors. These processes were further accelerated in the 1930s with the emergence of the Marathi 'talkies'.

IV

The emergence of national cultural forms and the drain of sexuality

The early years of the Marathi 'talkies' (1932 to 1942) were marked by prosperity and the popularity of mythological and social films (Bhagwat 1977: 315; Kale 1960: 462). At the same time, several *tamasha* theatres in cities and big towns had to be shut down (L. Joshi 1977: 162).

With the outbreak of the Second World War, restrictions came to be imposed on the import of raw materials and machinery for film-making, and the licensing of unprocessed film began. Meanwhile, the Hindi cinema began to emerge as the national cultural form and was accorded a preferential position in matters of licensing and the acquisition of raw materials

⁵ Most of this information was revealed in interviews with Kolhati women.

(Kale 1960: 469). The regional Marathi cinema revived in the post-war period with the emergence of a *tamasha* genre. *Jai Malhar* and *Ram Joshi*, the first films in this genre, were highly successful and owed their success to the *lavani* performances in the film (Bhagwat 1977: 315). The mainstream Marathi cinema thus adopted the *tamasha* genre, stressing its regional elements. One of the reasons for the popularity of the *tamasha* genre may have been the ban on the *tamasha* declared by Bombay State in the 1940s. The ban order argued that the lyrics of the *lavani* were lewd and obscene and that the *tamasha* was a form of veiled prostitution (Jintikar 1948: 5).

Paradoxically, then, as real *tamasha* troupes faced closure, the *tamasha* genre became central to the Marathi cinema whose urban audiences had begun to prefer the Eastmancolor Hindi films to the black and white Marathi films. The adaptation of the *tamasha* genre by the Marathi cinema marks out clearly the drain of sexuality of the female *lavani* dancers of the Kolhati and other lower castes. The Marathi cinema, dominated by Brahmins and Marathas, drew its raw material from the *lavani tamasha* of the Kolhatis, Mahars and Mangs, converted it into saleable goods, and took it back to the audiences in the small towns at double the price.

This process of selling involved the construction of the *nachee* as a *lavangee mirchi* (literally, red chilli, too hot to handle) who would be tamed and reformed by the hero (invariably either the Patil's son or school master, i.e., always upper caste). In fact the lyrics of a *lavani* from the film *Rangalya ratri asha* (Thus were the nights colourful) explicitly refer to the *nachee* as a *lavangee mirchi* and go into details of the varieties of chilli, etc. Other popular *lavanis* from the Marathi films constructed the *nachee* as a *pakhru* (bird), *bijlee* (lightning), and *jawanichi baag* (garden of youth) (Khebudkar 1980), the focus being on a native, wild and rustic sexuality which was to be tamed. The *nachee* of the Marathi film *tamasha* invariably came from outside the Kolhati caste, and only a few *tamasha* artists (Usha Chavan, Leela Gandhi, Sarla Yevlekar and Madhu Kambikar) could be successful as *nachees* in the Marathi cinema.

This construction of the *nachees'* sexuality in the Marathi films had serious consequences for the *lavani* performers in the *sangeet barees* and *tamashas*. As *tamasha* theatres faced the threat of closure, the contractors demanded that the *nachees* dance to the film *lavanis* and add erotic and provocative dance steps, as in the films. The raw material that went from the Kolhati women to the films, came back to them, ironically, in a form that they could hardly recognise as their own. In their *lavani* performances, they were to project sexuality as defined by the film-makers for whom their dance form had provided the raw material in the first place. Some of the women performers in the *dholki-phad tamashas*, in a bid to survive, transformed their performances into a *sangeet* orchestra wherein they performed to the film *lavanis* dressed in trousers, tee-shirts and caps. The Kolhati women of the *sangeet barees* have narrated to us their attempts to 'keep up'

with the film dances, though they have continued with the traditional attire of the nine-yard saree.

The lower caste *nachees*' sexuality, projected as too hot to handle or uncontrolled, becomes a means to titillate the cinema audiences, and her taming by the upper caste hero highlights not only the dichotomy of passive and pure wives as against wild and impure *nachees*, but also reiterates the inability of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women, thereby continuing to legitimise the hegemony of the dominant castes.

In the 1960s after the formation of the state of Maharashtra, there was an expansion of the Marathi cinema and several *tamasha* troupes were forced to become part-time troupes (L. Joshi 1977: 164). Many of the *nachees* of the *dholki-phad tamasha* revealed that they had to perform seasonal agricultural labour and domestic services in towns in order to make ends meet. The post-1960s also saw the emergence of the so-called Sugar Lobby (Attwood 1993; Lele 1981) and the embourgeoisement of the *tamasha* audience. As Marathi cinema acquired finances from the newly emergent Maratha capitalist forces in agriculture, the *lavani* began to use the metaphors of wells, pump sets, engines, mangoes, coconuts and papayas (HMV Series of Film *Lavanis*). These *lavanis* in the double entendre, objectified and fragmented the bodies of the *nachees*; the 'well' referred to the vagina, 'mangoes' to the breasts, 'sugarcane' to virginity, etc. The complete objectification of the *lavani* performers' bodies is now more than obvious.

In the last decade, the *sangeet barees* have settled into performing at theatres in towns and cities, while the *dholki-phad tamashas* move from village to village seeking to woo the ever-depleting audiences with sycophantic *vags* in praise of the ruling elite (two of the most popular *vags* centre around the martyrdom of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi), and with the *rangbazi* that comes at the end of the performance and has *nachees* performing to film *lavani* and songs.

V

Caste, gender and labour: The Kolhati women of the sangeet barees

In the social structure of Maharashtra, nearly half of the population belongs to the Maratha-Kunbi cultivator caste. While there are no indigenous commercial trading castes and the Brahmins constitute only a small minority living in the urban areas, the non-Maratha artisan castes (OBC) constitute 25 to 30 per cent of the population while the Scheduled Castes and Tribes make up 20 per cent of the population (Lele 1990: 177). The majority of *tamasha* artistes come from the Untouchable castes, mainly the Mang and Mahar castes, while the female dancers of the *sangeet barees* are of the Kolhati caste. The Mangs were known to be the village musicians and

songsters (Karve 1968: 33), while the Mahars were village watchmen and carriers of dead cattle. They had little land of their own and were the first among the Untouchable castes to seek employment in urban centres (ibid.: 106). The Kolhati have two main divisions, the Dulkar Kolhati, and the Kham or Bhatu Kolhati. The Kham Kolhati men do not work and are listed as subsisting on the immoral pursuits of their women (Russell and Hiralal 1915: 528). Kham Kolhati women are not allowed to marry. Their caste-based profession was entertainment, and they constituted a travelling or nomadic *balutdar* (the client in the system of twelve clients and patron, or 'jajman') (Karve 1968: 142). This caste increased its numbers also through the clandestine acquisition of illegitimate children born to upper caste women (Atre 1915).

Within the context of the interrelationship of caste and gender (Chakravarti 1992; Das 1987; Joshi and Liddle 1986; Kannibaran and Kannibaran 1991), some loosely connecting ideas regarding the *kasbi* or entertainer castes like the Kolhaties, the sexual division of labour and the caste-based division of labour may be put forward. Women's sexual insatiability was seen as the root of all problems, and the lower castes' failure to control their women's sexuality was deemed to be partly the cause of their impurity. In such a context, gender divisions reinforced caste divisions and the gender ideology legitimated both the structures of patriarchy and the organisation of caste (Chakravarti 1992; Joshi and Liddle 1986: 68). The caste ideology which ordered the division of labour also ordered the division of sexual labour. By appropriating the sexual and erotic labour of the *kasbi* castes and constructing their women as *kabnurkarin* or pigeons (the name given to Kolhati women in Maharashtra), the Kolhati women are located in the space of the erotic (albeit as in the male gaze) and are denied material and familial spaces. On the other hand, the upper caste women, whose reproductive and domestic labour is appropriated within the space of the familial, are constructed as *gharandaaz* or passive and moral, but are denied the space of the erotic.

Within this space of the erotic constructed in the male gaze, how do Kolhati women exercise their labour?⁶ At least six *sangeet baree* troupes are housed at the Arya Bhushan theatre⁷ in Pune at any given time of the year, except the period between Dashera and Diwali, which is the annual holiday for the artistes. Almost all the troupes are owned by Kolhati

⁶ To seek answers to this question, life histories of *nachees* were documented. Most of the interviews with the *nachees* were conducted at Narayangaon where all the *tamashas* gather to accept yearly invitations, and at the Arya Bhushan theatre. Some published interviews of *tamasha* artistes were also consulted.

⁷ The Arya Bhushan theatre in Pune is at least seventy-five years old and has been controversial in the social history of Pune as the centre of *sangeet barees* and of private *baitbhaks*. The theatre has a central hall where *sangeet barees* were held every evening. The troupes are housed in small rooms adjacent to the central hall.

women, and every troupe includes at least three or four male members as musicians, a *songadya* or male comedian, and the main *nachee* with five to seven chorus girls and dancers. The main *nachee* (sometimes her mother or aunt) is the owner of the troupe and is known as *bai*. After every Diwali, the *bai* signs a contract with the theatre owner for an amount which varies with the popularity of the troupe. She then pays per programme to the other artistes in the troupe. A troupe generally plays at a theatre for two years before it moves to other cities and towns. The *sangeet baree* artistes perform every evening between 8.00 and 11.30 PM. All the troupes perform every evening and are allotted 20 to 25 minutes each. The audience at these public performances come from varied economic backgrounds and regulars at the Arya Bhushan theatre range from rickshaw-drivers and lawyers to small businessmen. As each troupe begins to perform, the *daulat jadda* (the practice of bidding by the audience to have a *lavani* of their choice performed) assumes prime importance. *Daulat jadda* also includes *baksheesh* given from the audience to the *nachees*. The highest bidder (often one who pays in hundred-rupee notes) places the money between his lips from where the *nachee* takes it with her lips. The money earned from this *daulat jadda* is placed on the harmonium and then divided between all the artistes in the troupe. The earnings from the *nachee's* sexual labour are not entirely hers since the unsaid understanding is that her body and art belong to the troupe. The theatre has small rooms for *baithaks* (private performances) wherein the *nachees* perform before select audiences. These *baithaks*, each lasting for an hour, go on to the early hours of the morning, with charges ranging from Rs. 500 to Rs. 1,000 per *baithak*. There are often special *baithaks* in the afternoons, with the result that the *nachees* are on their feet and wearing their *ghungroos* (weighing at least five kilograms) for thirteen to fourteen hours. Most of the *nachees* suffer from varicose veins, acidity and ulcers because of irregular eating and sleeping schedules.

The majority of *nachees* have a *malak* (literally, an owner or keeper) and many of them have given up their work in the troupe for long-standing relationships, only to come back to the troupe after a year or two, having realised the insecurities of being a 'non-married-keep'. The *nachees* insist that sexual relations are established only with the *malak* in order to keep the other customers at bay—'to play hard to get' so that the customers keep coming regularly to the theatre. Though the *nachees* are the bread-winners of their families, which generally reside in the rural areas, all decisions concerning putting a girl out for business or 'alliance with troupes' are taken by the local caste panchayats. A Kolhati woman—once she is put out for business in the *sangeet barees*—cannot marry and any transgression of this norm is punishable by the caste panchayat. All decisions about the employment and training of the *nachees* involve the kinship network and joining an outsider's troupe for economic reasons is looked down upon. Most *nachees* express their wish to keep their daughters away from the theatre, and have invested heavily in education for their children.

The day-to-day decision-making and management of the troupe by the *bai* gives an outward appearance of authority and independence which may be read as 'resistance', but what is lost in such a reading is the fact that the ultimate authority of employing and developing *nachees* rests with the caste panchayat, i.e., with the males of the Kolhati caste in consultation with some of the senior retired *nachees*. The older generation of *sangeet baree nachees* revealed how, at the end of their careers, they were at the mercy of their brothers who compelled them to put their daughters out for business. This evidence points to the importance of relating factors of both caste and gender in reference to control over female sexuality: there is a tendency in writing on this subject to romanticise lower caste patriarchies as permissive (Dietrich 1992), overlooking the specificities of patriarchy in the lower castes and their responses to patriarchy in the upper castes.

VI

New political purposes and the desexualisation of the tamasha

In the 1940s, Bombay State brought a ban on *tamashas* of all types. The Home Minister explained that the *lavanis* were lewd and obscene and hence needed to be censored. Moreover, the display of *nachees* outside the *sangeet baree* camps for the purposes of drawing crowds was seen as an indecent and hidden form of prostitution (Jintikar 1948: 5). In 1948, the Tamasha Sudharna Samiti (a committee for *tamasha* reforms) was constituted for reforming the *tamasha*. All scripts and lyrics had to be approved by this Samiti which was headed by Principal Datto Vaman Potdar (a Brahmin liberal writer, historian and Vice-Chancellor of Poona University). During the same period, when the *tamasha* artists under the banner of the Tamasha Parishad were protesting the labels of obscenity and indecency, the Samyukta Maharashtra, as mass movement demanding the formation of a united Maharashtra on a linguistic basis (as against the bilingual Bombay State) was using the *powada* and *lavani* as symbols of Maharashtrian cultural unity.

To avoid state censorship and accusations of hidden prostitution, some of the *sangeet barees* seem to have found a way out via the 'Sanskritisation' of the *nachee*. The *sangeet barees* now advertised themselves as *soubhagyavati sangeet barees*, the title of *soubhagyavati* implying the women's married (and sexually controlled) status. In reality, however, the Kolhati women revealed that business went on as usual. The Kolhati women, the *nachees*, were in public defined as the *soubhagyavatis*, but in their dance and private *baithaks* they were still described as the *lavangee mirchees*. Once Maharashtra state had been convinced of lack of lewdity and obscenity in the performances, tax exemption and other facilities could be obtained.

The political appreciation and transformation of the *tamasha* genre dates back to the *jalsas* of the Satyashodhak Samaj which was founded by Phule in 1873 to organise the middle and low castes for cultural revolution against

Brahmanic Hinduism (Omvedt 1976: 137). Spreading the Satyashodhak message took three forms: (a) lectures; (b) books and newspapers; and (c) the use of popular song and drama forms (ibid.: 144).

The *tamasha* form was adopted by the Satyashodhak Samaj from the 1890s, but was referred to as *jalsas* because of the low esteem in which *tamashas* were held by the elite. The Satyashodhak *jalsas* were therefore instructory *tamashas*, *tamashas* following the traditional form but with new content (Omvedt 1976: 211). These *jalsas* praised modern science and education, while mocking sacred institutions and religious traditions. The traditional *gavlani*, the dialogue between Krishna and the milkmaids, was transformed into an encounter of the hero with village Brahmin women, the encounter being a critique of Brahmanical practices. The troupe members of these *jalsas* were men of the lower castes (Bagal 1933: 69). It is clear that these *jalsas*, which played a prominent role in forming and spreading a popular Maharashtrian culture of religious and caste revolt, did not include the women performers of the lower castes. In fact, to a large extent the *jalsas* highlighted their difference from the *tamashas* through the exclusion of women performers. This points towards continuity in the liberal, puritanical stand of leaders of both the Bombay 'awakening' as well the non-Brahmin movement.

The *Ambedkari jalsas* of the 1940s were the performances in the *tamasha* genre which carried Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's message of *vatan taka* (shed your caste roles) to the rural masses (Bhagat 1992: 87). The *jalsas*, it was argued, were to be in the genre of the *tamasha*, but the *ranjan* (entertainment) motif of the *tamasha* was to be dropped (ibid.: 88). As a result, the *jalsas* eliminated female performers from the *tamashas* and simultaneously brought about a transformation in the role of the *songadya* (comedian), according him a central role (Kiwale 1992). By deleting the role of the *nachee* the *tamasha's* 'progressive' appropriation of the genre could not result in any reformulation of the *nachee's* role. There was no questioning of the dominant construction of the *nachee* as immoral and inviting, but merely a reiteration of the ideology of the dominant castes and classes. The cultural troupes of the Rashtra Seva Dal and the Communist Party also used the *tamasha* genre in the same vein as the *jalsas* (Paranjpye 1982: 248).

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In an emergent transnational culture, the revival of the *lavani* is next to impossible and the alternative spaces for *lavani* performers are almost non-existent. The senior among the *nachees* mourn the loss of their art, while the younger among them aspire for a healthy home for their daughters. Maharashtra has responded with reform programmes to teach the making of jams and jellies, and with a token appreciation of the ethnic, now limited to annual cultural festivals. The life histories of the Kolhati *nachees* raise questions about the role and space of the ethnic. More specifically, they point towards the gendered process of the appropriation or drain of

the sexuality of lower caste women performers in the context of emergent national and transnational cultural forms.

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