

Transformation of *Tamāsā* in Contemporary Maharashtra, India: From Folk Art to Public Culture

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Many previous studies have examined Indian performing art and folk art. However, relatively few have analyzed *tamāsā*.

Tamāsā is a Persian word meaning fun, play, and entertainment that traveled via Moghul armies to Maharashtra and Deccan. In these new lands, *tamāsā* came to refer to the popular Maharashtrian folk theatre, a tradition that remains fairly strong and popular in rural areas, although it has often been viewed as crass by urban dwellers.

In the past, *tamāsā* performances commonly involved dramatic sketch comedy, love stories, and profane satire. Traditionally, *tamāsā* was performed at the edge of a village to peasant audiences. Troupe members were classified as *Kolhātī* (the “other backward class”), *Mahār* and *Māng* (*Dalit*/untouchables), and Muslim. Many of the actresses also worked as prostitutes.

As theatre by and for the common people, *tamāsā* has played a major role in rural culture. However, upper-class urbanites have tended to dismiss *tamāsā* as a vulgar or churlish performing art. Recently, however, *tamāsā* has been reevaluated. The rise of India’s middle class since the 1990s and economic liberalization have increasingly linked rural and urban areas. *Tamāsā* has also changed, with its plays and staging configurations becoming more elegant. With these changes, *tamāsā* now holds a place in the cultural identity of the new-middle class.

Traditionally, only men went to view *tamāsā*. Currently, however, *tamāsā* performances in urban theatres have become popular among women. Many young middle-class women also study *tamāsā* as a cultural art and even post videos on the Internet of themselves performing *tamāsā* dances.

I suggest that *tamāsā* has been transformed from a folk art to “public culture.” Public culture is the zone of cultural debate [Breckenridge & Appadurai 1995]. *Tamāsā* today has cultural value as a representative performing art of Maharashtra and its new middle class. However, the pattern and creation of meaning associated with *tamāsā* is not fixed or built from a one-dimensional sense of values. The current situation of *tamāsā* is not so much an “invention of tradition” or the creation of “national-culture” as it is the emergence of a public culture. Pluralist citizens come to *tamāsā* to debate and negotiate the public sphere, instead of political interests.

As examples of *tamāsā*’s increasingly important place in the public sphere, it is now the primary entertainment of the Ganesh Chattrthi, the most important Hindu festival. Newspapers and magazines also feature vigorous discussions on the modalities of *tamāsā*. *Tamāsā* entertainment also features in constructing identities, such as being “Maharashtrian,” “living in an urban area,” and “belonging to the new middle-class.” Furthermore, *tamāsā* embodies essential components of Maharashtrian identity.

This study has described the transformation of *tamāsā* into public culture. Additional studies of the relationship between India’s economic growth and expanding urban culture are required.

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