

Dashavtar: Then and Now

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November 2014

Dashavtar (दशावतार) is a traditional folk form of theatre in the Konkan region of Maharashtra and Goa. Konkan region is the 720 km coastline of Maharashtra and Goa. In Maharashtra, it covers six districts- Thane, Palghar, Mumbai, Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg. Dashavtar is performed in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts of Maharashtra and in Goa. It has been supposedly brought to Maharashtra from coastal Karnataka in 1728 by Shyamji Naik Kale. Hence, every Dashavtar performance begins by an invitation to him when the *Sutradhaar* says, “*Kalebua, Dashavtaraschala!*” i.e. “Kalebua, let us begin with the performance!” The first performance of Dashavtar was staged in Mahakali Temple at Adivare in the Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra. The first literary reference of this theatre art form is found in Marathi in *Dasbodh* (दासबोध) written by Samarth Ramdas, a Marathi saint poet, which goes as

खेळतानेटकेदशावतारी |तेथे येतीसुंदरनारी |

नेत्र मोडिलीकळाकुसरी |परीअवघे धटिंगण ||

- {दासबोध ६.६.११}

(If the *Dashavtari* performers present a neat show, it will be attended by even beautiful ladies. But the notorious element in the audience will anyway criticize the art.)

Dasbodh is a creation that dates back to A. D. 1659 and going by it, Dashavtar can be seen to be existing even before A. D. 1700 and seems to have been lost as an art from Maharashtra and Shyamji Naik Kale seems to have brought it back. There is another stream of thought that

believes that Samarth Ramdas must have mentioned Dashavtar performance from Karnataka since he has travelled all across India in his lifetime. Going by any of the above stated arguments, Dashavtar has travelled to Maharashtra from Karnataka and it is inspired by a folk theatre art form called *Yakshaganaw* which is said to have originated between 11th and 16th century in Karnataka.

The Dashavtar performances are staged between *KartikPournima* and *Chaitra* month according to the Hindu calmanac. Thus, these performances are found to be staged in the post- harvest season starting from *Dashera – Diwali* festival in October- November in a year to Holi festival in March/ April in the next year. The Konkan region also celebrates the *Ganesh Chaturthi* (and Ganesh festival) with zeal in August- September. Hence, there are a number of performances which are also staged for this period. Dashavtar performances run from dusk to the dawn. This theatrical form is called ‘Dashavtar’ because it is based on the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. It specially bases the show on the *Matsyavatar* or the fish-incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The performers expect the audience to be ready for the show and therefore, *taldhumali* is played on the *mrudang* before the show begins to invoke the spirit of enthusiasm. The orchestra sits alongside the performance area. The accompaniments include *mrudang* or *2rasa*, harmonium or organ and *zaanz (manjeera)*. At the same time, the remaining cast performs *puja* of the weapons and the mask of Lord Ganesh used in the play. The performance does not require an elaborate stage property. A few wooden chairs or a bench and a piece of cloth to act as a curtain suffice the purpose. In fact, the temple hall or *mandap* itself acts as a performance area as well as audience seating area.

The show is divided into two parts- *purvarang* and *uttarrang*. The *purvarang* begins with the entry of the *Sutradhaar* who anchors the entire show. He introduces the audience with the scheme of events and also to the performers in absentia. This is followed by the *Naman* with entry of Lord Ganesh along with Riddhi and Siddhi on the stage. Dashavtar is a lyrical theatre

form and therefore includes dance, music and song performances along with the script in prose. A mask of Lord Ganesh and suitable costumes are used to personify the characters. Dashavtar is a costume theatre form and uses elaborate costumes for the characters. After a musical tribute by the Sutradhaar to Lord Ganesh, Goddess Saraswati enters the performance area to bless the team and the audience. A wooden peacock is tied around her waist to signify her *vahan* or vehicle. The *purvarang* comes to an end with her exit. This is also called as *Aad Dashavtar*. The *uttarrang* or *Aakhyan* begins with the presentation of the story of Matsyavatar where the demon called *Shankasur* steals the *3rasa* from Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu has to appear in fish-incarnation to relieve the gods from him. This performance is followed by the depiction of one more incarnation of Lord Vishnu and it is more often than not *Narasimhavtar* in Maharashtra and *Krishnavatar* in Goa. After Dashavtar, a mythological play follows; then *Fugdi* (a dance form) between Radha and Krishna and the show ends with the *dahikala* or *Dashavtarikala* as a *3rasad* for everybody present there.

The artists who perform Dashavtar traditionally come from a particular set of communities in Konkan. Most of them belong to a caste or community called *Devali*. Devalis are a caste which is in the service of the temple of the village deity or *Gramdevata*. They are supposed to have an origin from the maids of the Kings of Sawantwadi and Malvan in Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra. They offer their services at the temple. Some of them also play drums i.e. *Nagara* at the temple; while some are involved in agriculture and animal husbandry. But most of them have been found to be landless labourers. The artists may also belong to a community called *Gurav*. The village appoints them to light a lamp daily at the temple. But they are not Brahmins. The temple management owns land in the village which is supposed to be tilled by the Guravs and they are given a share in the produce. The remaining produce is the property of the temple and the proceeds from sale are used for maintenance of the temple as well for the expenses during the festivals or *Jatras* or *yatras*. The artists may also be drawn

from the *Lingayat* community. Dashavtar is staged between the month of October and March and hence, is related to the life cycle of the agricultural society in Konkan. For the artists, too, this folk art is a secondary profession and allows them to travel for the shows after the farm work is completed. Since the major produce of rice in Konkan is a *kharif* produce, the agricultural labour finds itself effectively free to engage in an art form like Dashavtar during the remaining part of the year.

The group of artists or the Dashavtari *Mandali* would travel across the region with the costume and property in metal boxes to perform at the contract shows. It is only recently that the Mandalis have turned themselves into theatre production houses and have started treating the contracts commercially. The invited Mandali would stay at the temple and perform at the temple itself. A part of the temple premises would be converted into a make-up room and the artists would paint and dress themselves in the character that they are depicting. Female roles are traditionally played by male actors in Dashavtar. The artists would dress in the elaborate costumes prepared by them. The make-up would be away from the realistic look and the faces would be coloured in white for a male character, pink for the female character and black for the negative character. Every Dashavtar performance has to include *Narada* either as a character or as the Sutradhar. Stage lighting was not a must and a common source of light was enough for the show to be staged. It is only recently that lights and public address system have been included in the stage property of the performing group. Even today, the actors who are able to shout the dialogues out loudly and reach the larger number of audience effectively are treated with respect and are preferred over the others. The Mandali would offer equal opportunity to every artist to play every role in the play in turns and it is only a few hours before the show that the day's cast would be decided. The script in Dashavtar is also very fluid keeping in mind only the central theme of Matsyavatar and it would include humour based on the personalities and the details of the village they are performing in. In fact,

Dashavtar even carried the nationalist messages during the Indian freedom struggle. The language used in the performance is *Malwani* in Maharashtra and *Konkani* in Goa. Both are dialects of Marathi. The *samvad* between the Sutradhar and Shankasur is the highlight of the play since it includes rustic jokes which appeal the local audience. The group may hire separate singers (who are also music directors) for the season apart from using the traditional *dhuns*.

There have not been many efforts to document the scripts and musical compositions used in Dashavtar. This is partly because of the fluidity in the scripts and also due to the fact that the traditional music compositions have been passed on to the next generations of artists as well as village community as a part of the oral tradition of passing on knowledge. The first effort in this direction was made by the National Centre for Performing Arts, Mumbai under the leadership of its then director P L Deshpande in the 1980s. TulsiBehere, a folk artist himself, procured his Ph D on Dashavtar during the same project and has later on begun with the documentation about Dashavtar. As a part of his effort to revive this folk art, he has also staged Dashavtar in an all- female crew in 2011 for the Theatre Academy of University of Mumbai. In fact, there have been only two instances of all- female cast of Dashavtar performance before that. Once when a senior artist BabiNalang staged such a show in Girgaon in Mumbai and at another occasion at Khnawali when another senior artist Mama Mochemadkar had to stage the show with the *Bhavinis* from Goa when the male artists refused to work with him.

Since the DashavtarMandali used to perform on the invitation by a village, the local temple management would pay the Mandali according to the capacity of the village. But a minimum amount of remuneration would be decided before accepting the contract show. For example, the temple would pay the Mandali 10 *payali* (1 *payali*= 4 *sher* and 1 *sher*= 933 gms) rice. The main artist would be paid double the amount of rice out of this. Last minute performance

would attract special gifts and an announcement of the same would be made keeping the show in suspension. The Konkan region has always provided unskilled and semi- skilled labour to Mumbai and these workers are called as *Chakarmanis*. With the involvement of Konkan population in trade and related activities in Mumbai and especially with the establishment of textile mill in Mumbai in 1856, the region moved quickly from barter system to cash economy. Hence the Dashavtari artists, too, started getting paid in cash. It is also customary that Riddhi- Siddhi, after their first appearance with Lord Ganesh in the play, reappear in the audience during certain intervals collecting tips or contributions from the audience. Now that DashavtarMandalis have converted themselves into theatre production houses in the way they are managed, it is the production house which produces the plays; manages the costumes and property; manages the travel and also procures more contracts. These Mandalis, in fact, engage the main artist on a monthly payment through the year and make a separate payment to him per show. For example, TusharNaik, a star actor who plays a female part in the show in Naik- MochemadkarDashavtariMandali, is paid Rs. Twenty Five thousand per month and receives Rs. Five thousand per show.

This folk art form which was once a characteristic feature of the cultural fabric of Konkan experienced a major downfall towards the end of 19th century, particularly in Maharashtra. There are various reasons for the same. One, the Census records show that there is a continuous out flux or migration out of Konkan towards Mumbai and Kolhapur districts in Maharashtra in the same period. This was owing to the great famine of 1876-77, lack of enough agricultural activity due to absence of irrigation facilities in Konkan, lack of alternative means of employment and others. This led to outflow and therefore, absence of potential artists or even the audience for Dashavtar. Two, the exposure to bigger cities allowed the population an exposure to alternate methods of entertainment. For example, the neighbourhood in the village would prefer to listen to radio programmes instead of an

elaborate arrangement for any theatrical activity. Three, the older generation had lesser and lesser opportunities to train the newer batch of artists in this art form. Four, with the advent of television sets at home, there was a lesser need to get together and enjoy in a group. Five, fifty three percent of Maharashtra in urbanized today and Konkan was one of the first ones to get urbanized since it was a money- order economy. This disturbed the village or community life pattern and hence, the art form too. Six, with improved modes of transport and communication the chakarmanis would visit homes more number of times; but lost connect with the local life. Therefore, they found the long drawn performances of Dashavtar uninteresting. Seven, with urbanization, the number of jatras or yatras started reducing and offered lesser opportunities for the DashavtariMandalis to stage their performances. Eight, the remuneration for the show did not increase at the rate at which the other prices were increasing and there was lesser monetary incentive for the Mandali to perform. And lastly, the artists playing the female part in the play found it increasingly difficult to find a match for their marriages. Women had started gradually to participate in the public performances; but Dashavtar had not given a place to them in its folds. So, the male artists playing the female part were constantly under suspicion about their sexuality and there were cases reported of the sexual abuse with them. Any folk art form which loses the social acceptance and support stops thriving and so did Dashavtar.

The re- emergence of Dashavtar can be credited to a number of factors. One, 1980s saw a revolutionary change in Marathi literature. Along with the Dalit literature, different dialectical literary contributions too started enriching the readers in Marathi. One dialect which produced largest amount of literary works during this period was Malwani. Malwani language was quickly adopted by Marathi theatre as a large number of then Marathi theatre personalities had their roots in Konkan. So, various plays had depiction of Dashavtar in them. For example, *Vastraharan*. Second, following this change in the field of literature and

theatre, the National Theatre for Performing Arts took up documentation of Dashavtar as a project on priority. Third, in the same period, Department of Tourism, Government of Maharashtra redesigned its tourism policy and decided to make Konkan a major tourist destination. As a part of a complete package of the Konkan experience, it offered Dashavtar performance as a folk art representation of Konkan. Out of all the folk performing arts of Konkan, Dashavtar is the only art which does not have any religious context for performance. For example, *Dankas* a folk art is performed after death of a person; *Gondhal* is to be performed only at the auspicious occasions. This, therefore, made Dashavtar not just an off-agricultural season activity; but could offer a complete livelihood to a number of artists. This has increased the participation of youth in this art form again. Four, the Government of Maharashtra has also provided subsidies to the DashavtariMandali in form of mini- buses for their travel. Five, there are more number of banks ready to offer loans to these Mandalis for the initial investment in costumes and now, a little more elaborate stage property. Six, the misconceptions about the sexuality of the artists in the play are also being cleared with information explosion and exposure and that is no longer a deterrent to any artist playing whether a male or a female part in the play. Seven, the number of yatras or jatras in Konkan and the number of people visiting the same have been consistently on risesince the 1990s. The reasons quoted by the experts have ranged from increased religious fanaticism to increased brahminization to increased commercialization of all the deities to the feeling of insecurity owing to competition, terrorism and so on. But the net effect has been an increase in the number of Dashavtar performances. Lastly, the process of globalization has also resulted into some amount localization or inward- looking tendencies in all fields of enquiry. Whether it is to be treated as a part of the cultural politics of the market or not; but this might also be one of the reasons of folk arts like Dashavtar having re- emerged.

The next question that may arise is to examine whether this downfall and then re- emergence of Dashavtar has any relationship with the cultural globalization. Conceptualizing globalization is difficult as no single universally agreed or uncontested definition exists. It refers to an increasing level of interdependence between national systems byway of trade, military alliance and domination and may also impact cultures of these national systems. Culture is not just a spiritual and religious heritage, but also a set of material practices with which people live and produce the means of livelihood. If culture is believed to be this, it becomes a field of contention and conflict among classes and other social forces that struggle for dominance, as Aijaz Ahmed puts it. According to Maidul Islam, there is and had always been an autonomous space for folk culture which is nothing but an amalgamation of folklore, oral tradition, folklife, folk practices etc. which is currently under threat from the neo-colonial and neo-liberal globalization in the garb of postmodern cultural globalization just like the colonial cultural production thwarted the growth and development of indigenous cultural forms. The postmodern global culture has become a consumer culture. Under a consumer culture, consumption becomes the main form of self-expression and the chief source of identity. It implies that both material and non-material items, including kinship, affection, art and intellect becomes commodified, that is their value is assessed by the context of their exchange rather than the context of their production or use. The concept of cultural globalization is discussed in terms of expansion of this consumer culture by the agencies of cultural dissemination like print and electronic media, advertising etc. It has been observed that this dominant global culture which, in due course of time, has become popular mass culture marginalizes the folk culture. Dashavtar has shown these classic features of cultural overshadowing in the past leading to its degeneration both in the colonial and post- colonial period. But it is interesting to note that the current phase of cultural globalization has, in fact, revived this folk art form rather than thwarting its growth. It would be further interesting to

explore whether the revival has worked on the levels of the literary elements and art elements in this theatre art form or it is just growing with being offered as a commodity on the platter of the exhibitionist culture of fast growing consumerist society.

Endnote:

This paper is a byproduct of a major research project on Folk Arts in Konkan by Dr. Pushpalata V. Rajapure- Tapas.

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