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Lavani in Transition: A Cultural and Media Analysis of Maharashtra's Iconic Performance Form

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Abstract:

This paper explores how Lavani, one of Maharashtra's most recognisable performance traditions, has changed across different historical and media periods. Although Lavani is usually introduced as a folk dance, it is actually a multi-layered form that combines singing, storytelling, rhythm, gesture, postures, and emotional expression. Its growth has been shaped by oral traditions, caste backgrounds, gendered performance styles, and the influence of shifting cultural spaces. The study draws from cultural theory, performance studies, gender studies, and media analysis to examine Lavani in three major phases: its place in traditional folk and stage environments, its transformation in Marathi cinema, and its more recent presence on YouTube and digital platforms. Six selected performances are used as case studies to trace how choreography, audience engagement, and expressive strategies have adapted over time. The writings of Hall, Butler, Mulvey, Schechner, Appadurai, and Foster help frame the discussion by highlighting how representation, embodiment, media, and cultural memory operate in performance. Across these different contexts, the analysis shows that Lavani maintains its rhythmic and narrative core while reshaping its style to suit new platforms and audiences. This transformation demonstrates both the resilience of folk performance and the ability of cultural practices to adjust to modern environments while still carrying the memories, meanings, and social knowledge embedded in them.

Keywords: Lavani, transition, cultural studies, performance studies, embodiment, media transformations.

Introduction

Lavani has long been a central part of Maharashtra's cultural identity and remains one of the state's most recognisable performance traditions. Although many people describe Lavani as a folk dance, it is more accurate to see it as a combined performance form that brings together sung narrative, rhythmic movement, expressive gestures, and elements of improvisation. The form grew within the travelling tradition of *Tamasha*, a performance space known for its lively mix of music, humour, social commentary, and playful interaction between performers and audiences.

Over many generations, Lavani developed through oral transmission, shared community memory, and commonly practiced gestures and rhythms. These elements helped create a performance style that carried both entertainment value and cultural meaning. Scholars have pointed out that traditions do not remain the same simply because they are old; instead, communities continuously reshape them according to the needs of the time. This idea is important when thinking about how Lavani has moved across different social settings and media environments.

Historically, Lavani flourished in *Tamasha* troupes that travelled through rural Maharashtra. For instance, the performances relied heavily on direct interaction between dancers, musicians, and the audience. Live instruments such as the *dholki*, harmonium, and cymbals formed the musical base of the performance, while the dancers used expressive gestures, voice modulation, and rhythmic steps to tell stories. Many performers came from marginalized communities, and their work on stage involved both artistic creativity and social vulnerability. Their portrayals of desire, humour, defiance, and emotional tension often challenged dominant ideas about femininity and respectability.

Representation plays an important role in Lavani. As Stuart Hall explains, meaning is formed through shared cultural signs (Hall 43), and Lavani's gestures, expressions, and posture communicate messages that audiences understand within their regional context. Over the twentieth century, Lavani gradually moved beyond village settings and caste-specific spaces. Urban theatre, government-sponsored cultural festivals, and stage performances helped the form gain recognition among wider audiences. Performers like Surekha Punekar introduced Lavani to new spectators by forming professional troupes and highlighting technical skill, stage confidence, and narrative improvisation.

Cinema brought another major shift. Film makers reframed Lavani through narrative storytelling, planned choreography, and camera work that guided how viewers saw the performance. These cinematic adaptations allowed Lavani to reach new audiences while also changing its visual appeal and emotional interpretation.

In recent decades, Lavani has appeared in music videos, and across digital platforms such as YouTube, OTT, and social media. These new media spaces emphasise shorter, visually striking content, which has influenced Lavani's pacing, choreography, and style. Viewers now often watch Lavani in fragments or clips rather than as a full-length performance, which affects how the form is understood and appreciated.

To explore this long journey, the present study examines six different performances that represent Lavani in traditional stage / folk, cinematic, and digital settings. Through these examples, the paper analyses how Lavani negotiates cultural memory, gendered expression, and media transformation while maintaining the rhythmic patterns and expressive gestures that define its sole identity.

Literature Review

Studies on Lavani mostly come from research on folk theatre, regional culture, and dance traditions in Maharashtra. Many scholars describe Lavani as an important part of

Tamasha and explain how its musical structure, narrative singing, and gestures developed in travelling performance communities supported by local audiences. These works show that Lavani is a hybrid form that mixes oral storytelling, rhythm, and improvisation.

Ethnographic studies add more detail by discussing specific styles. (Dhamale et al. examine the Sawal–Jawab tradition and explain how performers keep the dialogue improvisational while responding to changing audience expectations. Broader surveys of folk dance place Lavani alongside other Maharashtrian forms; in this context, Lavani is noted for its emphasis on feminine expression and wit.

Recent research looks at Lavani's movement into urban theatre and state-supported cultural programs. These studies identify Lavani as a marker of regional identity and show how performers deal with issues of caste, class, and respectability while maintaining their artistic work (Kamble 3). Some writers also trace Lavani's shift from royal patronage to later social marginalization and then to its revival through stage shows and public festivals.

Contemporary scholarship examines Lavani in film, television, and digital spaces. Researchers note that these media change Lavani's pacing, choreography, and audience reach. Films like *Pinjra* and *Natarang* receive attention for turning Lavani into stylized cinematic sequences. Digital-era studies focus on Lavani's presence on OTT, YouTube and social media through modern movies with high proceed highlights for movie promotions, arguing that online viewing changes traditional ways of watching the form.

While these studies offer useful insights, very few examine Lavani across folk, stage, cinematic, and digital contexts together with critical theories. This study addresses that gap by analysing how Lavani adapts to each medium while keeping its expressive identity.

Framework and Methodology

This study uses ideas from performance studies, cultural theory, gender analysis, and media scholarship to understand how Lavani changes across different performance settings.

Schechner's idea of "restored behaviour" helps explain how Lavani's gestures and footwork are learned, repeated, and carried forward as part of a shared cultural memory, while still allowing room for variation (10). Stuart Hall's discussion of representation is useful for understanding how Lavani creates meaning through familiar cultural signs that guide how audiences interpret gestures, expressions, and movement (43). Butler's concept of performativity helps explain how dancers express femininity through repeated actions and rhythmic movement (177). Mulvey's work on the cinematic gaze is applied to understand how camera framing shapes the viewer's attention in filmed Lavani (12). Foster's writing on kinaesthetic empathy helps describe how gesture and movement communicate emotion to the audience (10).

Media theory also contributes to this study. Jenkins's idea of convergence explains how cultural forms adjust to new technologies while still keeping their core identity (13–14). Appadurai's idea of "mediascapes" helps place Lavani within the larger flow of cultural forms that move across different media platforms (35).

The study follows a qualitative approach and uses six case studies taken from folk, stage, cinematic, and digital performances. Each performance is examined as a cultural text. The analysis focuses on gesture, spatial arrangement, costuming, vocal style, audience interaction, and camera framing. Together, these frameworks and methods help explain how Lavani adapts to new performance environments while keeping its expressive core.

Analysis

Traditional and Stage Folk Lavani

A close study of Lavani in its traditional and stage forms helps explain how the performance later changes in cinema and digital media. The "Lavani, Folk Dance of Maharashtra" shows Lavani in a setting that resembles a community event. The dancers wear colourful *nauvari saris* and traditional jewellery, and they perform with live musicians playing

the *dholki*, harmonium, and cymbals. The camera mostly uses medium and wide shots, which helps show the shared performance space and gives the viewer a sense of the communal environment ("Lavani, Folk Dance of Maharashtra").

Even though the performance is recorded, it still keeps the feeling of a live event where gesture, rhythm, and sung narrative come together. The idea of restored behaviour (Schechner 10) helps explain this, since Lavani dancers rely on familiar gestures and steps passed down through shared practice, while also adding small variations based on the music and on each other. This combination of repeated patterns and improvisation is central to Lavani's style. Hall's work on representation is also useful here, because the meaning in Lavani depends on cultural signs such as sidelong glances, playful hand movements, and expressive hip work that the audience understands within their social context (43). Even though the performance is filmed, the camera framing still gives a sense of being part of the live audience.

Surekha Punekar's performance "Ya Ravji Basa Bhauji" presents a more theatrical version of Lavani. She performs on a proscenium stage with microphones, lighting, and an audience whose reactions become part of the atmosphere. Her choreography blends traditional steps with gestures shaped for theatre settings. She begins with confident footwork and posture, establishing her command on stage. She also improvises vocally, interacts directly with the audience, and responds to the musicians' rhythm ("Ya Ravji Basa Bhauji").

Gender expression plays a major role here. Butler's idea of performativity helps explain how Punekar expresses femininity through repeated gestures, rhythmic patterns, and expressive movement (177). Mulvey's discussion of spectatorship is also relevant, since the stage framing and lighting highlight her presence in a way that resembles cinematic display, though she maintains her own control over the performance (10). Foster's idea of kinaesthetic empathy helps show how her movements communicate emotion and character through bodily expression (7).

Together, theses stage performances show the basic elements of Lavani such as live music, expressive storytelling, and active audience interaction. These traditional forms form the base from which later cinematic and digital adaptations grow.

Cinema Lavani

Lavani's move into cinema brought major changes to how the form was presented and understood. Film introduced planned choreography, camera framing, and narrative structure, which reshaped the form while keeping its rhythmic identity.

The sequence "Chabidar" from *Pinjra* is one of the earliest important cinematic examples. In this performance, actress Sandhya wears a *nauvari sari* similar to the traditional style, with jewellery and hair ornaments that highlight Lavani's visual codes. While the choreography still uses familiar gestures like expressive eyes and controlled hip movements, the camera changes how viewers experience the dance. Close-ups and wide shots guide the audience's attention differently from live performances ("Chabidar Chabidar"). Mulvey's idea of the cinematic gaze helps explain how the camera controls the viewer's point of view and shapes the dancer's visual presence on screen (10). It is also placed within a moral and emotional storyline of the cinema. The narrative adds tension between desire, art, and social respectability, framing Lavani in a way that differs from its village setting ("Chabidar Chabidar").

The sequence "Wajle Ki Bara" from *Natarang* represents a later stage of cinematic Lavani. After nearly four decades, Lavani in films appears more visually elaborate. Sonalee Kulkarni's performance features group choreography, fast editing, strong lighting, and vibrant colours. The movements combine traditional Lavani steps with modern dance influences ("Wajle Ki Bara"). Jenkins's idea of convergence explains how older cultural forms survive by adapting to new media without losing their core identity (13–14). It also deepens the cultural meaning of Lavani. The film's story follows a male artist who struggles with the social

expectations of performing Lavani ("Wajle Ki Bara"). Butler's concept of performativity helps interpret the contrast between the protagonist's effort to adopt feminine gestures and the female dancer's fluid expression (177). Through this narrative, the film explores the discipline, labour, and emotion involved in Lavani performance.

Together, these sequences show how cinema turns Lavani into a polished visual spectacle. While film reshapes Lavani using sets, lighting, and editing, it still keeps the expressive rhythm and gestures that define the form.

Contemporary and Digital-Era Lavani

Lavani's latest phase appears in digital videos, and online platforms with highly processed, audience centric, camera focused performances. These settings favour short, visually striking performances, which change Lavani's style and how audiences experience it.

The performance "Sawal Jawab Song" from *Chandramukhi* shows this clearly. Dancers Amruta Khanvilkar and Prajakta Mali wear coordinated *nauvari saris*, jewellery, and makeup suited for high-definition recording. The choreography uses synchronized steps, expressive glances, and fast spins. The camera moves quickly and focuses on facial expression, posture, and ornamentation ("Sawal Jawab Song").

Foster's idea of kinaesthetic empathy helps explain why the performance remains emotionally strong despite being highly polished (7). Appadurai's concept of mediascapes is also relevant because Lavani now circulates as short clips across platforms like YouTube, where audiences often watch it individually rather than in groups (35). This changes how spectators engage with the form.

Recent movie, *Devmanus* offers another version through its sequence "Aalech Mi". Here, Lavani appears within a television narrative. The scene is framed with medium shots and close-ups, and focuses more on facial expression and upper-body movement than on full

choreography. This style fits the rhythm and emotional tone of serial storytelling ("Aalech Mi").

Digital platforms influence Lavani by encouraging visuals that work well on screens. For example, choreographers highlight exaggerated gestures for short online clips. Lighting and editing effects also enhance Lavani's visual appeal. Jenkins's work on convergence helps explain how Lavani mixes its traditional movement patterns with visual styles borrowed from music videos and cinema (2).

These digital-era performances show how Lavani maintains its expressiveness while adjusting to faster, fragmented viewing habits.

Synthesising: Cultural and Performative Transitions

A comparative look at the six selected performances shows how Lavani moves across folk, cinematic, and digital spaces while still keeping the expressive features that define it. Each phase adapts Lavani's gestures, singing style, spatial use, costumes, and narrative elements to the artistic and cultural demands of its setting. These shifts demonstrate Lavani's ability to balance tradition with change, showing how the form protects its core identity even as it adopts new methods of presentation.

In the "Lavani, folk dance of Maharashtra," Lavani is performed in a shared physical space where dancers, musicians, and audience members remain closely connected throughout the event. The dancers respond to the rhythm of live instruments and to the reactions of the people watching. The gestures, footwork, expressions, and phrasing come from long-standing cultural practices passed down through performance communities. The sense of community participation is central here; meaning is created as performers react to the audience's energy and the musicians' cues ("Lavani, Folk Dance of Maharashtra").

"Ya Ravji Basa Bhauji" carries this traditional spirit forward but also shows the influence of urban theatre and professional staging. Her dance remains rooted in familiar

Lavani movements, but her performance is shaped by lighting design, microphones, stage boundaries, and a seated audience in a modern auditorium. She uses pauses, improvisation, and direct eye contact to draw viewers into the performance. While she preserves the emotional and rhythmic qualities of Lavani, she also adapts her gestures and timing to fit the expectations of contemporary theatre culture ("Ya Ravji Basa Bhauji"). Together, these two folk and stage examples highlight Lavani's connection to community memory, oral tradition, and embodied storytelling.

Cinema brings a different form of mediation; in this case, the camera reshapes how Lavani is framed and perceived. In "Chabidar" and "Wajle Ki Bara", it is influenced by camera angles, controlled lighting, editing, and narrative context. In "Chabidar," the dancer's gestures are framed through close-ups and wide shots that guide the viewer's perspective more precisely than in live performances. The choreography is carefully planned, and the emotional tone is tied to the film's storyline about desire, art, and social tension. The performance becomes a structured visual experience, blending traditional steps with cinematic presentation ("Chabidar Chabidar").

In "Wajle Ki Bara", these qualities become even more prominent. Sonalee Kulkarni's dance is marked by bright colours, group choreography, dramatic lighting, and rapid cuts that enhance visual impact. The performance reflects Lavani's ability to blend older stylistic elements with modern cinematic expectations. At the same time, the film's narrative explores gendered labour and artistic commitment, showing how Lavani involves intense physical and emotional work ("Wajle Ki Bara"). Cinema therefore reshapes Lavani's appearance and meaning while still relying on its expressive vocabulary of rhythm, gesture, and storytelling.

Digital-era Lavani shows yet another transformation. In *Chandramukhi*, the performance "Sawal Jawab Song" is created with high-definition visuals, precise choreography, and coordinated costumes designed for online audiences. Camera movements,

lighting choices, and editing techniques highlight facial expression, ornamentation, and energetic movements ("Sawal Jawab Song"). Digital circulation also changes how Lavani is viewed—audiences frequently watch short clips rather than complete performances, which affects the form's context and pacing. Appadurai's concept of mediascapes helps explain this shift, since digital platforms allow cultural forms to travel beyond their local settings, changing how people encounter and interpret them (35).

"Aalech Mi" offers a more compact and narrative-driven version of Lavani. Here, the performance is shaped by the demands of contemporary digital gadget users. The dance is shorter, relies heavily on close framing, and focuses on upper-body movement and expression rather than extended footwork ("Aalech Mi"). This adaptation shows how Lavani is adjusted to fit into narrative timing and digital circulation patterns. Visual effects, colour contrast, and sound design further reshape Lavani into a format suited for quick online consumption. Jenkins's idea of convergence helps describe how Lavani combines elements from folk, stage, cinema, and music-video aesthetics to stay relevant in digital culture (2).

Across all three phases, folk, cinematic, and digital, Lavani negotiates different modes of spectatorship. Folk Lavani depends on collective presence and shared space. Cinematic Lavani invites viewers into a visually controlled and carefully edited world. Digital Lavani encourages repeated, individual, and often fragmented viewing. Even with these shifts, Lavani's core features remain visible: expressive gestures, rhythmic movement, narrative singing, and bodily storytelling. These continuities support Hobsbawm's idea that traditions endure through selective reinvention rather than by staying exactly the same (4–5). Lavani's journey across multiple media forms shows how cultural traditions can survive and thrive by adjusting to new spaces while still holding on to the practices that define their character.

Conclusion

Lavani's movement across folk, cinematic, and digital settings shows how cultural traditions survive by changing their expressive form while keeping their core identity. The performances studied in this paper reveal that Lavani continues to rely on its rhythmic structure, narrative singing, expressive gestures, and embodied storytelling even as it enters new media environments. In the folk and stage versions, Lavani depends on direct interaction between dancers, musicians, and audiences. These performances highlight the importance of shared space, live music, and improvisation, which help create the emotional energy that defines the form.

Cinema introduces a different mode of presentation by placing Lavani within narrative storytelling and controlled visual framing. Films like *Pinjra* and *Natarang* use camera movement, lighting, and editing to shape the viewer's attention and expand the expressive possibilities of Lavani. Although these cinematic adaptations alter how Lavani is viewed, they still rely on its distinctive movement vocabulary and emotional style. The visual spectacle created in such films allows Lavani to reach new audiences while also deepening its connection to themes such as desire, identity, gender, and artistic labour.

Digitally processed Lavani further expand the form's reach by circulating across YouTube, serials, and social media with high digitalisation and processing. These platforms favour shorter, visually concentrated performances that can be watched repeatedly and shared widely. As a result, Lavani's choreography, pacing, and visual presentation adjust to fit the demands of digital screens and rapid circulation. Even with these changes, Lavani keeps its expressive power through movement, gesture, and rhythm. The shift from collective viewing to individualized digital spectatorship reflects broader changes in how cultural forms are consumed in the twenty-first century.

Across all three phases, Lavani shows a strong ability to respond to new cultural and technological environments without losing its connection to embodied tradition. Instead of being weakened by these transitions, Lavani becomes more versatile and continues to find relevance in contemporary culture. Its journey demonstrates how performance traditions carry cultural memory and social knowledge while adapting their aesthetic form to suit changing times and audiences. Lavani's continued presence today reflects both the historical depth of the form and its ongoing capacity for creative renewal.

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