

## Freedom Movement in Oral Narratives of North Karnataka: A Study of Canarese Ballads

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#### ABSTRACT:

India's national movement was a long narrative of resistance before becoming a mass movement in the 20th century. Various forms of cultural expression played vital roles in awakening nationalist consciousness. Among these, the Lavani—a popular folk art form emerged as a powerful medium for spreading patriotic ideas and inspiring the common people. Particularly in North Karnataka, Lavani poets and singers used their art to glorify local heroes like Sangolli Rayanna and Halagali Bedas, linking folk traditions to the larger freedom movement. This paper examines the contribution of Kannada Lavani to India's struggle for independence and its lasting cultural impact.

#### KEYWORDS:

Lavani, North Karnataka, Oral Narratives, Freedom Movement, Sangolli Rayanna.

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#### Introduction

Before India's freedom movement evolved into an organized mass campaign, several local revolts and folk resistances paved its path. In this process, Lavani a traditional lyrical form blending song, rhythm, and storytelling became an effective tool for expressing collective resistance and nationalism. Originating from the Marathi-speaking regions, Lavani gained immense popularity in Belagavi, Dharwad, Bijapur, Bagalkot, and Gulbarga. Derived from the Marathi word Lavana meaning "beauty," Lavani initially celebrated romance, harvest, and devotion, but later evolved into a medium of social and political expression. As Kyatanahalli Ramanana notes, Lavani though folk in nature is neither primitive nor tribal but a dynamic art form that adapted myth, history, and contemporary reality through oral tradition.

Lavani belonged to both rural and urban audiences but gradually became rooted in rural culture. During colonial rule, it became a vehicle for political education, connecting the illiterate masses with stories of

local heroes and national ideals. By glorifying historical figures and mocking colonial oppression, Lavani instilled pride and unity among the people of Karnataka.

### **Sangolli Rayanna: The Folk Hero**

Sangolli Rayanna, the legendary warrior of Kittur in present-day Belagavi and Dharwad, became a central figure in Lavani compositions. His defiance against British authority during the regime of Kittur Chenamma symbolized the indomitable spirit of resistance. British officer John Faithfull Fleet collected six Kannada Lavanis, including one on Sangolli Rayanna Dange (“The Revolt of Sangolli Rayanna”), published in *Indian Antiquary* (1885–1890).

These songs recount Rayanna’s loyalty to Kittur Desai, his protest against exploitative tax collectors, and his transformation from a local official into a rebel leader. When the British and local elites exploited peasants, Rayanna mobilized the oppressed to fight back. He waged guerrilla warfare—perhaps the first of its kind in Karnataka—against the Company government. The Lavanis vividly describes his courage, tactics, and compassion for the poor.

One Lavani praises his journey to Surpur seeking support against the British, while another mocks Queen Victoria’s attempt to suppress him with massive forces. The poetic lines portray Rayanna’s valor in battle, his capture through betrayal, and his execution in 1831. Before his hanging, Rayanna identified his burial site, where a banyan tree was later planted—a site still revered by devotees. Through such songs, Rayanna became immortalized as a symbol of sacrifice and national pride. Lavani singers transformed his martyrdom into collective memory and moral inspiration for later generations.

### **Halagali Bedas: Resistance to Disarmament**

The Halagali Beda rebellion (1857–1858) was another episode immortalized in Lavani tradition. Following the Sepoy Mutiny, the British enacted the Disarmament Act of 1858, ordering all weapons to be surrendered. For the Beda community of Halagali in Mudhol, whose lives depended on hunting, this was intolerable. The Lavanis poignantly express their anguish:

“We bought these weapons by selling our cattle,  
How can we surrender such precious things?”

Initially, villagers tried to hide their weapons, but betrayal and coercion revealed their caches. When the Bedas refused to comply, the British sent troops led by Alexander Kerr and William Harlock to crush the rebellion. Under leaders like Hanuma, Baala, and Rama, the Bedas fought fiercely, even as their village was burned. The Lavani narrates their bravery, transforming a local uprising into a powerful story of defiance. The Bedas' resistance inspired later movements and highlighted the people's deep emotional attachment to freedom and dignity.

### **Lavani in the Gandhian Era**

During the early 20th century, as Gandhi's leadership turned the freedom struggle into a mass movement, Lavani once again became a vital cultural instrument. Without modern media, Gandhi's message reached rural India through oral traditions—songs, ballads, and folk performances. In North Karnataka, Lavani and Geegee songs became crucial in spreading Gandhian philosophy among illiterate peasants.

Marathi Lavani had already incorporated nationalist themes by 1900, influencing Kannada composers. In Belagavi's Hulakund village, Basappa Betageri (pen name Bhimakavi) and his troupe Azad Hind Geegee Mela composed Lavanis on patriotism, non-violence, and swadeshi. Their book Rastriya Geegee Padagalu (National Geegee Songs, 1930) marked a turning point in Kannada oral literature, shifting its focus from spiritual themes to national awakening. Their performances across Belagavi, Dharwad, Bijapur, Bellary, and Solapur drew huge crowds, overshadowing even popular wrestling matches at village fairs.

Through engaging rhythms and simple language, these Lavanis translated Gandhi's ideals of Satyagraha, Swaraj, and Swadeshi into songs people could sing and remember. Performers wore khadi and carried the tricolour flag, symbolizing unity and non-violence. Lavani thus became both a performance and a political act.

### **Nationalist Themes and Social Messages**

The nationalist Lavani not only propagated political ideas but also addressed social reform. Many compositions ridiculed exploitative officials and corrupt priests, presenting Satyagraha as a higher spiritual path than ritualism. Khadi, Gandhi Topi, and the spinning wheel became symbols of patriotism:

**“The mill came, the charkha vanished,  
Gandhi brought it back into light again.”**

Such songs glorified self-reliance and rural industry while mocking Western materialism. Wearing khadi was celebrated as an act of resistance, and the Gandhi cap became a badge of honour:

**“I wear a cap that thundered in Yerwada Jail,  
A cap that journeyed from Africa to Fiji.”**

Other Lavanis humorously exposed colonial exploitation—taxes levied even to fund the childbirth of British women in England. Some invoked Bharat Mata instead of deities, blending devotion with patriotism:

**“To Mother India we bow,  
Our Guru’s blessing, we seek in her service.”**

Such allegorical and metaphorical songs escaped censorship while kindling national consciousness.

The Lavanis also engaged with Gandhi’s call to eradicate untouchability, encouraging unity across caste lines. They mocked hypocritical traditionalists who preached purity yet joined Satyagraha alongside Harijans. These humorous yet insightful songs reflected the gradual social transformation fostered by the freedom movement.

### **Myth and Metaphor in Lavani**

Nationalist Lavani drew heavily on mythology to symbolize the struggle. Gandhi was likened to Krishna, Nehru to Arjuna, Subhas Bose to Bhima, and Bhagat Singh to Abhimanyu. The British were compared to Kauravas, and their Indian collaborators to Shakuni. This mythic framing made complex political ideas accessible and emotionally powerful, aligning India’s freedom struggle with the eternal battle between dharma and adharma.

Similarly, Lavanis revived pride in India’s glorious past and lamented its moral decline. Kittur Basavacharya’s works, for instance, paralleled W. B. Yeats’s “September 1913” in mourning the loss of idealism. Folk poets used satire, allegory, and coded language to mock British rulers as “red monkeys,” expressing resistance in ways that avoided direct suppression.

### **Legacy of Lavani**

Lavani’s contribution to the national movement lies in its ability to transform folk art into political awakening. Through song, it unified people across caste and class, turning the illiterate masses into participants of

the freedom struggle. The Lavani preserved oral memory of heroes like Sangolli Rayanna, Sindhura Laxmana, and the Halagali Bedas, making them symbols of local and national pride.

Even after independence, Lavani continued to serve as a vehicle for public awareness. During the literacy campaigns of the 1980s, troupes used Lavani to promote education and social reform, earning it the title of “the second great movement after Independence.” In the contemporary era, Lavani addresses issues like corruption, migration, and the decline of rural values. Although urban entertainment now leans toward cinema and popular music, Lavani remains a living folk tradition, evolving with the times while retaining its cultural essence.

### **Conclusion**

Lavani, once a folk song of entertainment, became a dynamic medium of patriotic expression and collective awakening. By blending myth, humor, and emotion, it carried messages of courage, self-reliance, and national unity to the remotest villages. The Lavanis on Sangolli Rayanna and Halagali Bedas symbolized early resistance; those of the Gandhian era translated political ideals into people’s language. Together, they bridged the gap between elite nationalism and folk participation, turning freedom into a shared aspiration.

The spirit of Lavani endures beyond independence. Its adaptability to new contexts—whether literacy, social reform, or political satire—shows its enduring role as the voice of the people. As an artistic chronicle of India’s freedom, Lavani stands not only as folklore but as a living testament to the people’s quest for dignity, justice, and independence.

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