

16. Traditional Indian Folk Theatre: Yakshagana

Author – Hima S, PG Scholar

Abstract:

Yakshagana remains an artistically colorful traditional theatrical drama and dance performance which first came about in the coastal region of Karnataka, India. Its origin dates back to the 15th century. The uniqueness of the art lies in the perfect integration of dance, music, gorgeous costumes, makeup, and storytelling which make it the most magnificent one among the hundred etc. Performances mostly take their themes from Hindu epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavata Purana, but the infusion of social and political themes in recent years has also made Yakshagana appeal to the present-day audience.

Yakshagana is an artistic performance involving the collaboration of many artists the dancers, actors, singers, musicians, and stagehands. The play is divided into the Mummela (foreground actors) and Himmela (background musicians and the Bhagavatha, the narrator and the solo singer leading the play with song and speech). Music is the lifeline of a Yakshagana program with real-time traditional instrumental play such as the maddale (drum), chenda, cymbals, and harmonium. Not only is the Bhagavatha a major part, but also, he is the one directing the performance and the spirit of the scenes on the stage with his own.

The beauty of the dresses and the makeup of the Yakshagana characters are its distinct features. Colorful, fancy and in some cases oversized garments and headdresses, which show the character traits – one of gods and demons or heroes and sages etc., are masked worn by the actors. Sometimes, the masks are also there which are made of wood or papier-mâché and decorated with intricate detail. The magnificent dressing along with the acrobatic dance steps, the fights from ancient times and the lively facial expressions, envelope the audience in the world of the play.

Without a break, and mostly old temple yards or open fields were the venues, it was the tradition to see Yakshagana performances from dusk to dawn. Some of the shows lasted even for more than several hours but nowadays, performances are shortened to fit into the current time frames. The plays are also famous for their improv skills – the characters in the plays often reply with quick-witted lines, speeches, and even philosophical debates all in character without changing they're correct ness, thus they bring life and the fact that one cannot foresee the continuation of the next given dynamicization part of the play.

Yakshagana troupes, by word of mouth, have been able to travel far and wide over the ages, and by the communities' generous support, which provides them food, lodging, and attending, pollinating, have also spread their works. While the performing arts genre of the tradition has recently seen decline of popularity, the revival movement to which local artists, cultural groups, and community participation have greatly contributed, is now leading the genre to the resurgence and re-ignition of interest especially of the younger generations. Creative and theatrical presentation, up-to-date concepts, and the popularity of workshops and educational programs are the means that not only safeguard but also deliver the Yakshagana tradition to the new generation and contemporary audiences.

In simple words, Yakshagana is a live heritage that connects the present with not only immediate but also distant past times through the blending of spirituality, the arts, and the participation of people.

The spiritual base combined with the creative aspect and the social side of the tradition make it a very sustainable form of artistic communication which neither stereotypes nor folkloristic encloses and thus remains a relevant and, at the same time, an original piece of on-going living culture, in its very nature a bridge, a link, and a continuum.

Keywords: Yakshagana, Folk theatre, Karnataka, Traditional performance, Music and dance drama, Cultural Heritage, modern themes

Introduction:

Yakshagana is a lively traditional folk theatre from Karnataka, India. It artistically combines dance, drama, music, and narration into just one performative art. The term “Yakshagana” directly refers to “songs of the celestial beings” and indicates both the mythological source and the heavenly-like way of the performance. The period between the 10th and 16th centuries can be taken as the time of the formation of Yakshagana along with the temple storytelling, Bhuta worship, and classical Sanskrit traditions in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada, Udupi, Uttara Kannada, and parts of Kasaragod in Kerala.

Such plays usually involve the dramatization of the Hindu epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* added with the local folklore and moral stories. Heroism, love to God, and the ethical battle are some of the major themes of Yakshagana that are reflected through the usage of the spectacular costumes, brightly colored makeup, the actors' exaggerated facial expressions, and highly energetic dance movements. The characters' rhythmic dance along with the actors' spontaneous speech is backed by the onstage musicians, mostly consisting of drummers and wind instrumentalists, who provide both the beat and the melody to the act.

From a traditional Indian theatre point of view, Culturally, Yakshagana is an in-between kind of theatre, i.e., it is located somewhere between classical Indian theatre and folk performance traditions, mixing up the discipline of *Natya Shastra* with the impromptu nature and openness of rural storytelling. Through the time it has served not only as a means of amusement but also as a vehicle for education, morality, and social unity. One of the biggest reasons for its continued existence and success is its flexible nature—today's performances also deal with social, environmental, and gender-related issues along with maintaining their ritualistic character.

In this way, Yakshagana is the flowing union of art, worship, and teaching—an icon of the living cultural heritage of Karnataka that still keeps developing with time but at the same time is deeply ingrained in the tradition.

Classification of Yakshagana Themes

Yakshagana Prasangas (episodes or themes) are basically the stanza of the Yakshagana Prasangas mostly they are taken from mythology; especially the epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Puranas. But in modern days, the non-mythological prasangas have also come up which mainly deal with the present society, social issues, and local culture. The themes of Yakshagana can be classified into the following six categories:

1. Interpolated Themes

These are the variations or additions of the traditional mythological stories.

Playwrights frequently put new episodes into a play or alter an existing one for their performances to become more attractive or suitable for the contemporary audiences.

Example: By inserting a humorous or moral sub-plot into the story of Mahabharata, thereby to emphasize a social lesson or to entertain the audience.

Reason: So that the audience get the opportunity of meeting the traditional themes in a more interactive way.

2. Folk Themes

The themes are taken from the folklore and oral traditions of the people of Karnataka.

The stories are based on celebratory themes of local heroes, the cultural practices, festivals, and those heroic deeds of the common people which have been passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

Example: The stories of folk heroes like Koti Chennayya or regional adventures that are unique to local communities.

Reason: These play an important role in the preservation, as well as promotion, of the local culture that helps to build up the community identity.

3. Historical Themes

The themes are about historical events, royal figures, warriors, and ruling dynasties of Karnataka or the regions in the South of India.

Through these plays, the battles, bravery, and other significant political events of the past are brought to life again.

Example: The stories about the life and struggles of the freedom fighter Sangolli Rayanna from Karnataka.

Reason: The main purpose of such plays is to inform the audience about past events and to evoke a sense of patriotism in them.

4. Legends of Local Temples

Yakshagana grammar written themes are based on local historical religious temple deep-rooted legends and rituals of the gods and temples in Karnataka.

The stories include fantastic events, the intervention of gods, or devotional acts relating to the local gods and goddesses.

Example: The stories that belong to Udupi Krishna Temple or Kollur Mookambika Temple.

Reason: Through these plays, the religious faith and the cultural heritage get strengthened further.

5. Imaginary/Social Themes

They are fictional or creatively conceived characters most imaginative episodes, which discuss topics such as social, moral, or ethical problems.

The topics they may deal with include justice, greed, family values, gender issues, or conflicts within society.

Example: The story that depicts the conflict between honesty and corruption or a story that supports the idea of gender equality.

Reason: The primary function of these plays is to educate the public about the issues of society and their participation in solving them.

6. Awareness-Oriented Themes

The subjects of these plays are limited to social problems of the present-day world, health, education, and public awareness campaigns.

Generally, they are didactic in nature and intend to inform people about matters of responsibility, good health, care of the environment, and how to prevent diseases.

Example: Yakshagana episodes highlighting malaria prevention, literacy, or environmental conservation.

Purpose: The main aim of such plays is to bring about social change by using the performing arts of the folk theatre as a medium.

Methodology:

The current review of *Yakshagana* has been designed through an in-depth qualitative and descriptive research methodology, with a primary focus on the analysis of secondary data sources. The methods employed entail the systematic gathering, scrutinizing, and interpreting of the material such as literature and performances that deal with Yakshagana, the topics, its change over time, the style of performance, and the cultural aspect.

1. Data Collection

The review mainly relies on secondary sources of information. The data sources for this work were diverse academic and cultural materials, which included:

- Published literature: Books, journal articles, and dissertations focusing on Yakshagana's origin, history, music, dance, dialogues, costumes, and thematic variations.
- Archival materials: Old manuscripts, Yakshagana *prasangas* (scripts), folk records, and translations available in libraries and research institutions.
- Digital resources: Online archives, video documentation of performances, websites of Yakshagana academies, and repositories such as the *Karnataka Yakshagana Academy* and *Sahitya Akademi*.
- News articles and cultural magazines: Reports, interviews with performers, and cultural essays that shed light on the modern adaptations and transformations of Yakshagana.

2. Selection Criteria

The sources of information of specific quality were selected to consider it on the basis of the following rules:

- Correctness and credibility of the data (ideally academic or official literature).
- Equilibrium of a traditional and modern version of the Yakshagana art.

- The focus on the theme-based research, talking about the mythological, social, historical, and awareness raising points of the themes.
- Relevance to the variety of the geographical and dialectical diversity (e.g., Badagu Tittu and Tenkutittu styles).
- Printed or graphic evidence about the document.

Analytical Framework

The materials collected were organized and analyzed with the help of such an analytical model, which combined a thematic and comparative analysis:

- Thematic Analysis: Eriksen of themes, dramatic structures and topics of performance in Yakshagana prasangas a phenomenon of re-occurrence. Out of this step, the process of categorizing the themes (mythological, interpolated, folk, historical, social, and awareness-based) was achieved.
- Comparison/Analysis: The contrasts between the old and the modern versions of Yakshagana were outlined, therefore the shift in the style of the performance, audience participation, costume design, and novelty of themes disclosed.
- Cultural Contextualization: All the topics were examined within the prism of cultural and religious traditions of Karnataka and, accordingly, its role in social interaction and teaching was emphasized.

4. Organization of Review

The reviewed articles were collated and planned out into the following primary sections:

1. The historical development and local color of Yakshagana.
2. Thematic classification and evolution of *prasangas*.
3. Performance elements — music, dance, dialogue, and costumes.
4. Thematic innovation and socio-cultural impact of the modern age.
5. The role of Yakshagana in contemporary society and its relevance.

5. Validation and Cross-Referencing

To maintain correctness and academic dependability, the entire set of information was cross-verified with various sources. Where there were differences in views (for example, regarding the source or development of the certain sub-forms), the opinion of the scholars was taken into account. The perspectives of the Yakshagana specialists and online repositories were combined to verify that the facts were indeed true.

6. Limitations

The review depends solely on secondary data, therefore, it does not feature first-hand ethnographic observations or interviews. Nevertheless, attempts were made to incorporate the most up-to-date and representative works of literature to provide a comprehensive view of the topic.

Discussion:

Traditionally, Yakshagana has been dependent on the Indian epics and classic mythologies for its plot, but in the last few decades, the art has taken a dramatic turn with modern experimental themes like interpolations, social awareness, environmental concerns, and the adaptation of film stories. It is this thematic expansion that has played a role in dramatic elaboration of stagecraft, choreography, presentation style that in turn, has created a hot debate in terms of authenticity and expansion of the tradition.

Artists and scholars discuss the fact that according to the wise innovations, Yakshagana has to correspond to the existing times and mirror the social needs. One example is, performing art is deified as a method of imparting knowledge of the population about health and social education about AIDS, smoking and other contemporary problems by presenting new story lines, but with the use of mythological frameworks so that it can be authentic. The improvisational and interpretive nature of yakshagana allows the artists to make the stories new and close to the audience, even in the case when a cultural background of the audience is changed.

Conclusion:

The best example of the reincarnation of the old traditional form is yakshagana, in which it can be reborn and get new colors. The balance that exists between the ancient mythological stories and the contemporary socially relevant issues has helped Yakshagana to maintain its attractiveness and position in the contemporary society. It is also suggested that writers and performers should preserve the unusual environment and identity of Yakshagana so that new productions and changes could not only enhance the tradition in terms of its aesthetics but also reinforce its position as a social agent. In a sense much more than just survival, it is through the fact that Yakshagana not only preserves its own culture but also ensures its social relevance to the future generations by being eternally attentive to the issues of the present and communal values..

References:

1. Ashton, M. B. (1969). Yakshagana: A South Indian folk theatre. *The Drama Review*, 13(3), 148-155.
2. Awasthi, S. (1983). Traditional dance-drama in India: An overview. In U. Satoru (Ed.), *Dance and music in South Asian drama* (pp. 64-77). Japan, Tokyo: Academia Music Ltd.
3. Bapat, G. (1998). *Semiotics of Yakshagana*. Udupi: Regional Resource Centre for Folk Performing Arts.
4. Bhagavat, H. M. (2015). *Odalina madilu yakshatare – bayalatada nenapugalu*. Bangalore: Anena Narayana Joshi Charitable Trust.
5. Bhat, V. N. (1966). *Kashmira kalaga*. Perla: Valakkunja Narasimha Bhat.
6. Gargi, B. (1991). *Folk theatre of India*. New Delhi: Rupa Co.
7. Joshi, P. M. (2015). *Yakshagana sthitigathi*. Mangalagangothri: Dr P Dayananda Pai & P. Satish Pai Yakshagana Adhyayana Kendra, Mangalore University.
8. Karanth, K. S. (1983). Fostering Yakshagana towards a brighter future. In U. Satoru (Ed.), *Dance and music in South Asian drama* (pp. 175-179). Japan, Tokyo: Academia Music Ltd.

9. Kumar, S. (2010). Role of Yakshagana in development communication. Media Researcher. Bangalore: Acharya Institute of Graduate Studies.
 10. Ranganath, H. K. (1979). Not a thing of past: Functional and cultural status of traditional media in India. Paris: UNESCO.
 11. Shastri, G. M. (2002). Prakshipta pauranika prasangaalu. In B. Kukkuvalli (Ed.), Oddolaga (pp. 254-258). Mangalore: Bantara Yakshagana Kalotsava Samiti.
 12. Shetty, C. Y. (2002). Adhunika prasangagalu mattu prayoga. In B. Kukkuvalli (Ed.), Oddolaga (pp. 259-263). Mangalore: Bantara Yakshagana Kalotsava Samiti.
 13. Someshwara, A. (2013). Yakshataru. Mangalagangothri: Dr P Dayananda Pai & P. Satish Pai Yakshagana Adhyayana Kendra, Mangalore University.
 14. Someshwara, A. (2013a). Yakshagangothri. Mangalore: Kalagangothri Yakshagana Kendra Trust.
 15. Usharani, N. (1996). Folk media for development. Bangalore: Karnataka Book Publishers
 16. Ramachandra, N. U. "Traditional Knowledge, Challenges and the Need for Revival." *Res Militaris*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1611-19.
-
-