

YAKSHAGANA – KARNATAKA’S THEATRICAL ART FORM

S. YAMINI & Dr. A. Sumathi Sundar

Bridge Academy college of Media and Fine Arts,

Affiliated to Tamil University - Tanjore.

Yaminiamini1991@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Yakshagana is a folk theater from South India. This paper talks about significance and aesthetical aspects of this folk form. The various idioms of this art form are discussed here.

Keywords: Folk, Natyasastra, Karnataka, Theatre, Art

INTRODUCTION

Yakshagana follows the Natyasastra tradition by developing a theatrical technique that combines the four types of abhinaya (enacting). As for the Vadika, it incorporates recitative verse, pure prose passages and stylized gatis that are classified according to the mood, situation and character of the animal, bird or human. Movement is set to seven material circles called talas: costumes and make up are elaborate and intricate. Sattvika sets the moral and ethical tone of the dramatic piece.

There are several choreographic patterns and floor designs that follow the conventions of Natyadharmi and incorporate the elements of Tandava and Lasya. The Yakshagana when examined for its structural and stylized features, leaves little to be considered pure folk in the sense of being untrained, unlearned and spontaneous.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ART FORM

Karnataka’s dance theater, Yakshagana has a classical background that spans over five centuries offering similar qualities to Kerala’s Kathakali, Yakshagana holds terrific status as a form of folk art. Its main distinctive feature is its religious connection, which is the most common theme of its plays. Yakshagana, being a theater of the masses, exhibits a coherent amalgamation of artistic elements, epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata are played in the paddy fields at night as part of traditional music.

Unlike what it sounds like, Yakshagana is actually a type of music that combines heavens and the earth and exhibits finer elements of ambiguity and energy, which are conveyed through the singing and dancing of the art form. The artistes perform in dramatic gestures while playing a drum known as chenda. Coastal Karnataka is known for its vibrant costumes decorated with detailed contours which highlight the rich cultural extravaganza of the people.

There is no doubt that one of the most remarkable dance dramas in India can be summed up as an utterly splendid concoction of the best classical music, polished choreography and ancient transcripts. Despite such a dramatic presentation the irony is the ensemble of gory battle scenes enacted in dance steps, accompanied by some trademark dramatic special effects, dazzling costumes which portray the robust and simple folk character of the performers. Sculptured softwood, decorated with mirrors and golden coloured paper is used to make the ornaments worn



by the artists. One of the most impressive aspects of Yakshagana is it combines both classical and folk language into one entity creating an atmosphere of fascination that crosses artistic boundaries.

In a typical Yakshagana performance, a prayer is offered to Ganesha after which there is a comedy act accompanied by chanda and tala, played by three people together. As part of the team, Bhagavata is the narrator and he narrates the story through songs, introduces the characters and converses with them at times. A strong understanding of the Hindu scriptures as well as sound musical knowledge are essential for becoming a performer in the plays. The artists portray a variety of mythological characters flawlessly throughout the shows. The use of dialogue is another unique feature of Yakshagana, which makes it so special.

In the modern world, Yakshagana is one of the most thriving art forms not just in India. In Karnataka alone, more than 10,000 Yakshagana performances take place every year, including seasonal tours, school and college performances and so on. Such a high number can almost be considered a testament to the fact that Yakshagana is the classic performance art form.

AN AESTHETICS UNDERSTANDING OF YAKSHAGANA

The fine art Yakshagana is a controversial art among the folk as well as classical arts of India. Most probably it is a never ending controversy in the field of fine arts. The word Yakshagana occurs in Sangita Sudha of Gavinda Dikshita.

In the beginning, probably it was singing poetry, and then it came to the stage as an audio visual art. The Sanskrit dramaturgy may have been used to turn this singing poetry into a theater performance centuries ago. As a result, a book must have been compiled on the subject called Sabhalaksana Mattuprasangapithike.

In Yakshagana are the verses of Yakshagana Prasngas. The story of these prasngas are from Indian mythology, compiled in the Vrta, Kanda, Satpadi, Curnika, Dandaka, Vacanas, etc. Most of the vrttas are in Sanskrit and few are in Kannada.

There is a possibility that the Bhagavattmela mentioned by some scholars could be a close parallel to the operatic drama form of the Ramayana in the Harivamsa Purana. A direct link between Harivamsa and Yakshagana, however, is not valid. It has been shown in inscriptions and chronicles that dance drama was generally prevalent, that there was a differentiation made between pure dance (nritya) and drama (natya) and that musical styles (sangita) evolved over time. The Mugud inscription mentions a Natasevya who was both a master of acting and dancing during the 8th century Both the words Nartaka and Nata are used.

There is only one conclusive and precise reference to the Yakshagana in History. The Malli ratna Purana, written many years later also refers to it. In the 16th century, Kavi Ratnakara Varni mentions the Yakshagana in his Bharateesa Vaibhava.

In south Indian rural theater, Yakshagana is a term used to describe a genre of dance-drama popular in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. In Tamilnadu, Terukuttu and in Andhra Pradesh the Veethinatakamu and Yakshagana are played out in scenes of song, dance and costume through more secular themes. There are a variety of forms and titles associated with



it in Karnataka, including Ata, Dashavatharaata, Bayalata, Bayaluntaka, Mela, Doddata, Sannata etc. In Kerala, Kathakali uses mudras to replace dialogue.

Karnataka's coastal districts of Uttara Kannadam, Udupi and Dakshina Kannada have two distinctive styles of Yakshagana. Badaguthittu or Northern style of the Uttara Kannada and Udupi Districts and Tankuthittu or Southern style of the new Dakshina Kannada district. Although both schools use different instruments and dance patterns, all elements of theater can be found in both.

Since the 15th century, Yakshagana has been perfected as a complete theatrical form being played for six months. The performance involves music, dance, mime, costumes and dialogue in an exquisite manner, forming an entire theater. Hindu epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavatha serve as inspiration for prasangas. Flawless costumes developed by anonymous artisans have contributed to the success of these Hindu epics.

There are many differences between the south Indian and north Indian classical music styles that make up Yashagana music. Songs written by folk poets and set in these styles have the qualities of functional music and mood music interspersed with melodies of the district. An exposition of the characters is provided through dialogues, spoken extempore which create a magical wonderland of fantasy. The clown Hasyagara wagging his tongue with a rustic level gives it a contemporary touch. The plays start at 9.00 p.m and last until dawn. In the 4th Octavo of the play, the Chande, the high-pitched drum and the shriek of the Rakshasa are sure to keep the audience interested.

YAKSHAGANA'S PERFORMANCE ASPECTS

Many varieties of Yakshagana are played in Karnataka, some intermittently and some continuously, some focusing on epic characters, some on secular themes, and some including love stories. A remarkable number of artists come from the rural areas like oilmen, farmers, carpenters, temple workers etc. It used to be that only a handful of people had formal education, but today one can see pandits impressing and astonishing audiences with their verbal fluency. There was no charge for performances until the 1940's, as the local landlord paid for every performance. Upon receiving the invitation from the loud beating Chande or drum, the audience trekked around 10 to 12 kilometers to the Rangastala or stage in the dried paddy field.

A single all-night performance would cost around few hundreds to thousand Indian Rupee, troupes were usually financed by the Temples and the fee was very nominal. Due to excessive rain in the Dakshina Kannada region, many temples have been washed away. Only a few temple troupes perform for free but they do not attract top notch artists. Many of them have moved to commercial troupes or tent troupes where wages are paid more. The glare of publicity, replacement of oil-wicks with electricity and flattery replacing appreciation by connoisseurs have all led to a decline in quality. The temple troupes of Mandarthi, Marnakatte, Kamalashile, Amritheshwari and Sowkoot continue to exist today in Badagu-thittu. In Thenku-thittu, we have Kateelu and Dharmasthala troupes.



CONCLUSION

Although originally a rural form of theater, Coastal Yakshagana evolved into a very sophisticated dramatic presentation that rivaled Bharatanatyam and professional dramas artistic quality and popularity in the state. The dance could not become classical with standardized Mudras or gestures, as in Bharatanatyam or Kathak. As a result of the extempore dialogue and the innovations in singing and acting woven into the scenes, there is no staleness or stagnation in the performance because the actors often change roles during the performance. With effective vocal training, the songs and dialogue will harmonize with the vigorous dance steps and gorgeous costumes to transport the audience to a world of fantasy and imagination.

The advent of modern technology and its application in all spheres of life led to a gradual change in the performance of Yakshagana. Unlike oil lamps, eclectic lights cast way too much light on the makeup and costumes, including complaints of jute for hair or Rakshasa;s tainted teeth. In order to match teh professional theater, unnecessary changes were made to the open-air noise pollutant as well as a disturbance of the environment because of the amplifying system. Scenes and scenery were introduced in the backdrop and instead of cotton garments, gaudy silk or polyester fabrics were used for costumes. As a result, traditional color contrasts were seriously disturbed and dialogue became overarching rather than music and dance. To attract crowds, excessive dramatic effects were introduced including bringing in live elephants for scenes like Gajendramoksha or Bharatanatyam and a folk dance called fishing. Despite the trick working to some extent, it soon leads to the art devolving into a series of gimmicks.

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