

Yakshagana

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Abstract

The present paper deals with *Yakshagana*, a folk form of South India. The research is historical, exploratory and aesthetic in nature. It finds out the different significances of the idioms of the art form.

Keywords: Yakshagana, Folk, Natyasastra, Theatre

Introduction

Yakshagana, like Kutiyattam and Kathakali, follows the Natyasastra tradition by evolving a theatrical technique which is harmonious balance among the four types of abhinaya (enacting): the Vacika, with the recitative sung verse and pure prose passages; the angika, having a well formulated system of stylized gaits(gatis)classified according to character or animal, bird or human situation and mood,and patterns and clusters of movement which are set to seven material circles of the talas; the aharya, with its elaborate and intricate costuming headgear and make up conventions; and the sattvika which sets the internal mood pervading the moral and the ethical tone of the dramatic piece.

It has the element of Tandava and Lasya and follow the conventions of Natyadharmi in exits and entries and in the establishment of locale through its several choreographical patterns and floor designs.

After one has examined these structural and stylized features, there is little that is left in the Yakshagana which can be considered as pure folk, in the sense that it can be taken as untutored, unlearned and spontaneous.

Kapila Vatsayan: *Traditional Indian Theatre Multiple Stream.*

Significance of the form

Yakshagana is a uniquely traditional form of dance theatre of the state of Karnataka, with a formidable classical background. Having a strong foundation of around five centuries, Yakshagana holds commendable status as a form of folk art, similar to Kathakali of Kerala. The main essence of this form of dance drama is its attachment with religion, which provides the most common theme for its plays. Yakshagana, being a theatre of the masses, the plays in it witness the coherent amalgamation of artistic elements of Sanskrit drama, traditional music played in temples and village squares, and battle themes from epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata, which are usually performed in the paddy fields at night. The strong hold of religious countenance in rural areas has led to an immense growth in its popularity, complimented with a highly respected status that the artistes of the plays enjoy in such places.

Yakshagana, unlike its rhetorical significance with heavenly music, is actually a unique musical convergence of the heaven and the earth. This art form exhibits finer elements of ambiguity and energy in its presentation, brought about through singing and dancing, accompanied by the playing of a drum called chenda, besides the dramatic gestures of the artistes. The artists adorn themselves with strikingly colourful costumes with rich contours, which highlights the rich cultural extravaganza of the coastal District of Karnataka.

The dramatic presentation thus evident is an utterly splendid concoction of the best of classical music, polished choreography, and primeval transcripts applied to give shape to one of the most astonishing dance dramas of India. The irony in the dramatic presentation is the ensemble of such panorama as gory battle scene enacted out in dance steps, accompanied with some trademark dramatic special effects, dazzling costumes, and ever extending diadems, thus exhibiting robust and simple folk character of the artistes. The ornaments worn by the artistes are prepared from softwood, which is carved and decorated with mirrors and golden coloured paper. One both of the most amazing features about Yakshagana is the synchronization of both classical and folk language into one entity, to build up such an air of fascination, which crosses artistic boundaries in theatrical discipline.

A typical Yakshagana performance begins with prayer offering to the lord Ganesha, which is followed by a comedy act, accompanied by the background music of the chenda and the maddale, and a tala (cymbals) played by a team of three. The narrator, who is also a part of the team is called Bhagavata, and is the producer, the director, and the head of the ceremony. His primary task involves the narrations of the story through songs introduction of the characters, and occasionally conversing with them. A sound musical knowledge and a well-built physical structure are the pre-requisite for an artiste, besides a strong understanding of the Hindu scriptures. The plays witness performances by the artistes enacting the roles of several mythical character in a flawless manner. Another unique feature of Yakshagana is the totally unrehearsed and unwritten use of dialogues, which makes it so special.

Yakshagana in the present day scenario is one of the most thriving art traditions, not only in India, but also throughout the World. It can fairly be said that the State

of Karnataka alone witness more than 10,000 Yakshagana performances every year, taking into account all the seasonal tours, school and college shows and so on. Such an impressive status can almost be considered a decree that Yakshagana is here to stay.

Aesthetics of Yakshagana

In his book *Yakshagana and its Sanskrit sources* Dr.G.S. Hegde observes:

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 occur in Sangita Sudha of Gavinda Dikshita.

*“Yakshaughagitampi gana saili” and
“Sri Parijataharana prabandham
Citram ka Valmiki carita kavyam
Ka(ta)thachyutendrabhyudayagajendra
Moksam caritam(ca)Nalasyacitram
Sri Rukmini Krsna Vivaha Yaksha
Ganam prabandhaanapinaikbhedan
Nirmaya vaghirnipunarthavagbhi
Vrividyatkaavinam vidhadhasiharsam.”*

The above statement hints that it is a type of “singing poetry”. But today it is performed as an audio visual art. Propably in the beginning it was a singing poetry, then it came to the stage. One can say that long ago a person who knew the Sanskrit dramaturgy, might have adopted this singing poetry as a stage art by adding the techniques of dramaturgy. For this performance he must have compiled a book Sabhalaksana mattuprasangapithike, the

preliminary treatise of Yakshagana. This performance is nothing but the Purvaranga of Sanskrit drama.

*The constituent elements of Yakshagana are verse of **YAKSHAGANA PRASNGAS**. The story of these prasnagas are taken from the Indian mythology, compiled in the Vrtta, Kanda, Satpadi, Curnika, Dandaka, Vacanas etc. the vrttas are in Sanskrit, very few are in Kannada. The stories are mainly dependent on Kannada literature, some are dependent on Sanskrit literature.*

Kapila Vatsayan in spite of agreeing that Yakshagana was first a sung narrative further mentions that:

According to some scholars, the description of a dramatic performance of the Ramayana in the HARIVAMSA PURANA as a ruse to slay Vajranabhasura is the first reference to Yakshagana. The Bhagavatmela mentioned therein may be a close parallel to the operatic drama form. It would, however not be correct to conclude that the Harivamsa playlet and Yakshagana have any direct relationship. In inscriptional records and chronicles, much evidence is found of the general prevalence of dance drama the, the distinction practiced between pure dance(nrtya)and drama(Natya), and the evolution of musicak styles(sangita). Inscription at Pattadakal tells us of a Natasevya of the 8th century who was master of both acting and dancing. Both the words Nartaka and Nata are used. The Mugud inscription.

(close to Dharwar, dated A.D.1045) refers to the Natakasala. However, the first conclusive and precise reference to the Yakshagana is found only in the 12th century work Candraprabha Purana. The Malliratna Purana, written a

few years late, also refers to it. In the 16th century, Kavi Ratnakara Varni speaks of in his Bharateesa Vaibhava.

Yakshagana is the generic name of a common form a dance-drama characterizing the rural theatre of four South Indian states Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Karnataka. The Veethinatakamu of Andhra Pradesh, Kathakali of Keralam Terukuttu of Tamilnadu and Yakshagana of Karnataka have the same spirit of the theatre presentation of epic episodes in scenes of song, dance and costume through more secular themes can also be sometimes witnessed. In Karnataka it assumes various titles and forms like Ata, Dashavathara Ata, Bayalata, Bayaluntaka, Mela, Doddata, Sannata etc. Kathakali is a form in Kerala where the functions of the dialogue is taken over by standardlized mudras.

In the Coastal Districts of Karnataka- Uttara Kannadam, Udupi and Dakshina Kannada- two distinctive styles of Yakshagana ate prevalent, the Badaguthittu or Northern style of the Uttara Kannada and Udupi District and Tenkuthittu or Southern style of the new Dakshina Kannada District. The instruments, the dance pattern are markedly different in the two schools, but all the elements of the theatre are present in them.

Yakshagana blends elements of music, dance, mime, costumes and dialogue in such an exquisite manner that it certainly forms a total theatre. Coming down as a heritage since the 15th century. Yakshagana has been perfected as a complete theatrical form from being played for six months in a year to regale, instruct and edify the rural masses. Themes or 'prasangas' are usually drawn from Hindu epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharatha and the Bhagavatha. Gorgeoous costumes benefitting the epic hroews have been designed by anonymous artistes of yore . The music of Yakshagana, relying on South Indian and North Indian classical

music styles, has preserved district characteristics of its own. Songs written by folk poets and set in the styles of Yakshagana have the qualities of functional and mood music interspersed with a flavour of their own. Simple dance steps are worked out fully in a few traditional pieces of choreography to create a wonder world of fantasy. Dialogues, spoken extempore, give exposition of the characters and spellbound. A touch of contemporary reality is given by the clown 'Hasyagara' who wags his tongue at a rustic level. The plays commencing around 9.00 p.m. last until the early dawn and may look longish but are not considered tedious. The loudness of the Chande, the high-pitched drum, the shriek of the Rakshasa and the music of the Bhagavath in the 4th Octavo are sure to keep the interest from falling in the middle of the play.

Performative aspects of Yakshagana

In Karnataka there are many varieties of Yakshagana, some played intermittently and some continuously, some dealing with epic characters, some others having secular themes, love stories and romances. Artistes are drawn from among the rural people: oilmen, farmers, carpenters, temple-workers etc. Thirty years ago few had formal schooling, but now-a-days one can see pundits employing their verbal felicity to impress and astound the audience. Until the 1940's the performances were free for all, being played free at the command and expense of the local landlord. A space of 16'x12' area marked in the dried up paddy field served as the Rangasthala or the stage to which the audience trekked from around 10 to 12 kms after dinner having received invitation from the loud beating the Chande or the drum. The troupes were usually financed by the Temples and the fee was very small, as small as 3 or 5\$ for a single all night performance excluding cost of day's

food to the troupe. During the last forty years much rain has fallen in Dakshina Kannada and many of the old parrerns have been washed away. There are still 3 or 4 temple troupes performing free but they attract few first rate artistes. The latter are found in the commercial troupes or Tent troupes where wages and incomes have increased. Popular enthusiasm rules unabated in spite of tickets. Critics point out that quality has suffered what with the glare of publicity, electricity replacing oil-wicks, flattery replacing appreciation by knowledgeable connoisseurs. Mandarthi, Marnakatte, Kamalashile, Amritheshwari and Sowkoot are a few of the Temple troupes permorming today in Badagu-thittu; Kateelu and Dharmasthala troupesamong those raised by temples in Thenku-thittu. Among the noted Tebt-troupes ofBadagu-thittu may be mentioned Saligrama and Perdoor and Karnataka Yakshagana Sabha, Mangaladevi Yakshagana Mandali, Kadri Manjunatheshwara Male are among the best known in Thenku-thittu. From November to May next year, daily performances are given in scattered village centres by all these troupes.

Conclusion

Though originally a rural form of theatre Coastal Yakshagana developed over the years into a fairly sophisticated form of dramatic presentation which could rival its artistic quality and popularity the two major dramatic presentations on the state, Bharatanatyam and professional drama. Of course it could never become classical with standardized Mudras or gestures as in Bharatanatyam or kathakali. The extempore dialogue which woven into the scenes between actors, whooften change their roles on the stage and the innovations in singing and acting give it immense scope for perpetual renewal and hence never does the performance become stale or stagnant. Effective voice training could make the songs and dialogue harmonize with the vigorous dance steps and gorgeous costumes succeed in transporting the spectators to a spectators of fantasy and imagination.

The ushering in of modern technology and its application in all walks of life led to a gradual change in the performance of Yakshagana. The electric lights replaced oil lamps and threw too much light on all aspects of makeup and costume, including strands of jute used as plaits of hair or the tainted teeth of a Rakshasa. The amplifying system has led to music dangerously bordering on a noise pollutant and a source of disturbance to the environment. The need to compete with the professional theatre led to unnecessary changes in the open air stage. The backdrop was introduced with scenes and scenery. Instead of the traditional cotton garments in the costume, gaudy silk or polyester fabric came to be used. The concept of traditional colour contrast was seriously disturbed. Dialogues came to gain undue importance, relegating the music and dance to the background. Excessive dramatic effects like bringing in live elephants on the stage for scenes like Gajendramoksha, or scenes of Bharatanatyam or a folk dance like fishing were introduced for the sake of novelty and have become a part of the strategy to attract crowds. Through the trick works to a certain extent, it soon results in the degeneration of the art into a series of gimmicks to draw crowds.

Note

1. This paper is authored by Manish Mitra under the pen name Natakwalla Fakir.
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