

# Modern Themes in Yakshagana: Experimentation and Relevance

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## Abstract

*Yakshagana is a traditional dance-drama performing art of Karnataka, with a history of about 800 years. It is a multi-dimensional folk theatre comprising of dance, music, spoken word, body language, stage techniques, costumes and makeup— making it one of the most effective medium of communication. Yakshagana usually derives its themes from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and other mythologies. However, there have been a lot of experiments in the theme of Yakshagana, causing a lot of discussions and debates. The present conceptual paper examines these experiments under the classification of interpolated themes, folk, historical, imaginary, social themes, legends of local temples and awareness-oriented themes. It critically evaluates how these experiments have been received by the audience, artistes and the scholars.*

**Index Terms:** Yakshagana, performing art, folk theatre, traditional media, experimentation, modern themes

## I. Introduction:

Yakshagana is a traditional dance-drama performing art of Karnataka. Having a known history of at least 800 years, it is a multi-dimensional folk theatre comprising of dance, music, spoken word, body language, stage techniques, costumes and makeup— making it one of the most effective medium of communication. Ashton (1969) describes Yakshagana as “heroic, mystical, splendid, fierce, savage, and beautiful” art being “a theatre of battle scenes and heroism, loyalty and treachery, color and pageantry” (p. 148).

Offering an interesting view, Gargi (1991) feels that Yakshagana is not folk art in the sense of being spontaneous expression. “It is a self-conscious, highly developed operatic form that demands perfect knowledge of classical music, *talas*, epics and ancient plays. Its rigid classical singing, intricate footwork, and quotations from Sanskrit texts make it a bit removed from the folk. But the virile dancing, tumbling, acrobatics, extemporaneous speech, and the absence of a strict *abhinaya* language give it a folk character” (Gargi, 1991).

According to Awasthi (1983), it stands between the classical and highly evolved forms like kathakali, and simpler folk forms prevalent in different regions of the country, and represents “a continuum between the classical and the folk” (p. 72).

Yakshagana has two main geographical variants- *moodalapaya* (the eastern style) and *paduvalapaya* (the western style, also known as coastal Yakshagana). *Moodalapaya* is performed in most parts of Karnataka and

*paduvalapaya* is popular in the two coastal districts and adjoining areas. *Paduvalapaya* again has two variants called *Tenkuittu* (southern style) and *Badagutittu* (northern style). According to Bapat (1998), the highly influential modern forms of entertainment like cinema and television, have not really affected the popularity of Yakshagana in any significant way (p. 3).

Like many other folk arts in India, Yakshagana is basically a “religious art”, since it has its roots in temple courtyards. It gradually came out of the temple and became a part of the life of the common men. “These song form plays chose stories from their themes from the epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata and numerous other mythologies available in the Kannada language. Their heroes were supermen and gods like Vishnu, Shiva or Durga, as well as demons and demonesses. The burden of such plays has been ‘virtue prevails over vice’. These stories have great religious appeal for the people and hence are very popular” (Karanth, 1983).

Bapat (1998) is of the view that “no form of cultural expression can remain highly popular and continue to be so, unless it fulfills the collective psychic and emotional need of the people” (p. 3).

The present paper attempts to examine the mobility of Yakshagana, especially the experimentations done on its theme, based on interviews of scholars and artistes and secondary sources. Mobility is the essence of any art. Art that does not respond to the presence may not live long. According to Someshwara (2013), “A live art having mobility cannot live in past without having an idea about present and future. In case it continues the old habit, such an art becomes reactionary and anti-progressive. It loses its meaningful link with the presence.” (p. 65).

If certain art forms have survived over centuries mainly because of their experimentation and flexibility, Yakshagana can occupy the frontline. Preserving its identity even after facing a lot of challenges of the changing times, is the greatness of the art. From its theme, design, stage movements to the overall presentation, various elements of Yakshagana have been subjected to refinements in course of time. One cannot say that these refinements took place effortlessly. A traditional art with a religious background cannot adapt to the changes so easily.

From the experiments of Shivarama Karanth to Byale, the solo Yakshagana performances, there have been numerous experiments in the genre. The practice of installing ‘sets’ on the stage as an imitation of cinema and drama, Yakshagana-dramas, adaptation of film stories, *jodatas* (two troupes performing the same episode simultaneously), time-restricted performances- each experiment has resulted in various debates.

## II. Classification of themes

Since Yakshagana *prasangas* (i.e., episodes or themes) usually derive their sources from mythology, the non-mythological approaches have been considered ‘modern themes’ here. They can be classified as:

1. Interpolated themes
2. Folk themes
3. Historical themes
4. Legends of local temples
5. Imaginary/ social themes
6. Awareness-oriented themes

Stating that there was a big explosion in the composition of modern themes since 1950s, Joshi (2015) identifies them as mythological, historical, folk, imaginary, semi-imaginary, Sanskrit-drama based, filmy, Tulu mythological, social etc. “These themes include serious works faithful to the style and tradition, medium-level entertainments, and those ‘new’ ‘spicy’ themes dominated by humour” (Joshi, 2015)

## 2.1 Interpolated themes:

Scholars are of the view that novelty in Yakshagana subject began with the emergence of interpolated themes. Interpolated themes are those against the mythological beliefs. As mentioned earlier, Yakshagana is basically an art intended to propagate cultural values, faithful to mythology. Most of the Yakshagana poets depended on Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavata for composing *prasangas*. As time passed, they chose other mythologies like Shiva Purana, Skanda Purana, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Matsya Purana etc. People accepted these themes too just like Ramayana and Mahabharata. However, there have been oppositions from a section when there were *prasangas* against to the popular beliefs (Shastri, 2002).

“Interpolated themes were untouchable to many 4-5 decades ago. There were people who believed that performing such themes, or making somebody to listen to, was a kind of dishonor to the sacred mythologies; they also believed that such acts were a sin drawing audience to the wrong path” according to veteran Yakshagana artiste Moodambailu Gopalakrishna Shastri (Shastri, 2002). He remembers an incident where a renowned artiste refused to take part in a Yakshagana *Talamaddale* (another form of Yakshagana performed indoors without costumes, makeup and dance) and left the venue when he came to know that the *prasanga* of the day was *Krishnarjuna Kalaga*, which was an interpolated episode (p. 254).

The audience did not accept the themes like *Krishnarjuna Kalaga*, *Ramanjaneya Kalaga*, *Bheemarjuna Kalaga* (*Draupadi Pratapa*) so easily. However, such themes became acceptable gradually. The educated society started acknowledging the idea that the latent values of the older stories should be reflected on in a new light. However, those themes were not imaginary cock-and-bull stories though they were not in the mythology. They were the themes portrayed extensively in literature of Kannada and other languages. *Meenakshi Kalyana*, *Shwethakumara Charitre*, *Veeramani Kalaga*, *Lavakushara Kalaga*, *Chandravali Vilasa*, *Chandrasaha-* are the themes belonging to this category, which have been popular over the years.

‘*Manasa Charitre*’ of Mulki Venkanna Kavi of the previous century is an important work from the point of view of subject. Mind, anger, love, peace are themselves the main characters in this plot. Joshi (2015) is of the view that the first non-mythological plot is *Ratnavathi Kalyana* of Muddana.

## 2.2. Folk themes:

The experiment with folk or historical themes started with the entry of Tulu (a regional language of coastal Karnataka) in Yakshagana. *Koti Chennaya* is the first experiment in *Tenkutittu* while *Bedara Kannappa* is the first one in *Badagutittu*. The audience, who used to witness only mythological subjects, gained a different experience when they watched Yakshaganas of local folk tales in their own native dialect, and naturally they became popular. *Tulunada Siri*, *Perinjaguttu Devupoonja*, *Kordabba Baraga*, *Abbarada Babbarye*, etc are some of the examples. The audience of Tulunadu (the Tulu speaking region), who had high regards towards *Daivas* and *Bhootas* (i.e. spirits), welcomed their favourite folk heroes with a lot of love and affection (Someshwara, 2013). Amrit Someshwara, Shimantoor Narayana Shetty, Seethanadi Ganapayya Shetty, Kulai Madhava Bhandari, Siddakatte Vishwanatha Shetty, Tharanatha Varkady are the important authors in this category.

## 2.3 Historical themes:

Apart from folk stories, historical themes too gained popularity in Yakshagana. Sometimes *prasangas* mixed with mythology, folklore and history appeared more attractive (e.g., *Amara Shilpi Veera Shambhu Kalkuda*). *Chanakya Chandragupta*, *Aliya Ramaraya*, *Natyarani Shantala*, *Kadugali Kumararama*, *Krantiveera Bhagat Singh*, *Harsha Charitre*, *Pulikeshi Vijaya* and many other historical plots have been adapted to Yakshagana. The biographies of prophets of even Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity have been experimented in Yakshagana (e.g. *Ahimsa Kathe*,

*Sharanaleela Charitre*). Srinivas Havanur has stated that a Shakespearean drama was made Yakshagana in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Joshi, 2015).

#### 2.4 Legends of local temples:

Legends of local temples have been popular in both Tenku and Badagu variants. Though many *prasangas* get their origins in small mythological themes, they are developed on the popular fictions and beliefs fostered over generations. These *prasangas*, with mythology in the first half, history, folk or social themes in the second half, became nearer to the people since they suit the temperament of Yakshagana. *Bappanadu Kshetra Mahatme*, *Dharmasthala Kshetra Mahatme*, *Kateel Kshetra Mahatme* are some of the popular examples in this category.

#### 2.5 Imaginary/ social themes:

A number of *prasangas* based on the stories of subordinate kings or provincial heads of Tulunadu or imaginary episodes on some social themes too have been composed and staged. It is, perhaps, these imaginary *prasangas* that supported commercial tent troupes for many years. Though there have been oppositions to these *prasangas* very often, they were very popular at one stage. Even today many of the professional troupes both in Tenku and Badagu style have kept these *prasangas* as their ‘super hit’ themes. Joshi (2015) has estimated the number of such episodes as about 300 since 1960.

Karnataka Mela, Suratkal Mela, Kadri Mela, Mangaladevi Mela in Tenku Tittu, Saligrama Mela, Perduru Mela, Sirsi Mela in Badagu Tittu (*melas* are professional Yakshagana troupes) have attracted audience with such themes. Y Chandrashekhara Shetty is a prominent name among those who composed episodes of this kind. *Dharma Sankranti*, *Amatya Nandini*, *Raja Nartaki*, *Manasa Mandara*, *Megha Martanda*, *Ranganayaki* are some his *prasangas* staged by Badagu troupes, while *Barkura Bangari*, *Bangarada Gejje*, *Nelavarada Neelambari* are the *prasangas* staged by Tenku troupes and gained popularity (Shetty, 2002).

Kandavara Raghurama Shetty, Shimantur Narayana Shetty, Bottikere Purushotham Poonja, Anantharam Bangadi, Seethanadi Ganapayya Shetty, Kubevuru Puttanna Shetty, Guruvappa Bayaru, Kulai Madhava Bhandari, Devadas Eshwaramangala, Ravikumar Suratkal are some of the authors of this category.

The themes in this category resemble film stories. Most of the stories revolve around love, infatuation, friendship, revenge, regret etc and hence they have been criticized by a section of audience and scholars too. “It is true that some *prasangas* became popular due to their strong storyline and cultural background. But most of the imaginary of semi-imaginary stories which followed survived for one or two years and did not become valuable contributions,” notes Someshwara (2013).

According to him, “Many modern *prasangas* were dominated by mere entertainment while they lacked in-depth thoughts, introspection towards life, and human values. In continuation of the imitation of filmy scenes, people not only brought certain movie stories into Yakshagana but also started imitating popular film songs during performance” (p. 4)

#### 2.6 Awareness-oriented themes:

The adaptability of Yakshagana opened up another possibility. Government, policy makers and scholars felt that Yakshagana that has its origin in the folklore and is educative and closer to the hearts of the people can be used to take the development messages to the common man, and to create awareness against social evils and fatal diseases. Among the vehicles of development communication as envisaged by the government, Yakshagana has a greater recognition.

Yakshagana has been used to take various issues to the common people, ranging from environment protection to family planning, health consciousness, literacy, annihilation of untouchability, communal harmony, small savings, eradication of corruption and so on. Yakshagana has covered even nutritious food, iodine salt, breast feeding, GATT, SHGs, employment schemes, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, rural development (Kumar, 2010). The art has not left the recent Swacch Bharat Mission, Jan Dhan and Beti Bachao schemes untouched.

Initiatives to take contemporary messages to common people and bringing them to the mainstream of development by using the local folk arts have been done in various countries across the world. The United Nations had taken a lead in such initiatives as early as 1950s and 1960s. India too started using folk media for development communication in the same time. Jatra of West Bengal, Bhavai of Gujarat, Burrakatha of Andhra Pradesh, Lavani of Karnataka, Harikathe, puppetry, street plays were used towards social communication (Usharani, 1994). The idea got more emphasis during the First Five Year Plan of 1952 itself. Even the main intention of the Music and Drama Division of Akashvani established in 1954 was to explore the possibilities of the medium of art.

Ranganath (1979) notes that mass communication in India was in fact through non-mass media till some six decades ago. "People's upsurges in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries against the alien domination were spearheaded by the seemingly innocent rural performing arts of song and storytelling, dance and folk theatre including the puppet. These arts continued to play a meaningful role in rural areas in educating the masses on social evils like drinking, illiteracy, untouchability, superstition, communal conflict, controlled family, malnutrition and insanitation."

Yakshagana performances with the intention of social awareness are being held under the aegis of various government schemes. The Music and Drama Division, the Field Publicity units of the Centre and the states have been encouraging Yakshaganas of this kind with financial aid. This does not mean that all such experiments were done only to get the government funds. Some episodes were composed to promote government schemes while some others were composed as a voluntary initiative. Thus, the search for newer possibility of Yakshagana was continuous. The role of creative authors and voluntary organisations was considerable here.

Valakkunja Narasimha Bhat had published '*Kashmira Kalaga*' in 1966 based on Indo-Pak war. "I request the artistes to perform the prasanga without dishonoring the character of any leaders since they are still in the social life. The intention of the work is achieved when people get inspired towards making India united as a single entity and power" the author notes in the forward (Bhat, 1966). Prasangas with similar themes like *Kashmira Sandhana*, *Swatantrya Vijaya*, *Bangla Vijaya*, *Nasser Pratapa*, *Eradane Mahayudda*, *Sirimao Sandhi* have been published (Joshi, 2015). They are more like awareness-oriented plots than historical episodes.

A number of prasangas meant to create awareness towards environment protection, literacy and health consciousness have been composed. *Nisarga Sandhana* of Hostota Manjunatha Bhagavat, *Marisha Kalyana* of Amrit Someshwara are important ones. Bhagavat (2015) remembers his initiative to compose '*Nisarga Sandhana*' as a support to the environmental movement of Uttara Kannada district in 1980s, which was first staged by a children's troupe, and the same was appreciated by environmentalist Madhav Gadgil. The *prasanga* was performed not only in various parts of Karnataka but also in states like Maharashtra, Kerala and Goa. Sanskrit songs and Hindi dialogues had been used when it was performed non-Kannada regions (Bhagavat, 2015).

*Marisha Kalyana* of Amrit Someshwar with a strong theme of environmental protection became a valuable contribution since it had taken its inspiration from mythology. It was a successful *prasanga* both in Bayalata and Talamaddale. It had been developed taking clues from his own mythological plot '*Chakravarthi Dasharatha*', and hence it had a strong back up of mythology. Manila Shivashankara Shastri had composed '*Japani Krishi Vijaya*' a *prasanga* introducing newer farming method, as early as 1960.



Yakshagana has been used as a part of literacy mission too. The government of Karnataka took the help of Yakshagana troupes and artistes to popularize literacy movement in Dakshina Kannada district in the 1990s. As per the request of the government, Mangalore-based Kala Gangothri Yakshagana Kendra conducted a workshop for Yakshagana poets, scholars and artistes and published a compilation of new prasangas with the themes of literacy mission and environment consciousness (Someshwar, 2013a).

Bangalore-based Yakshadegula has performed another *prasanga* 'Ileyannana Kathe' more than 1000 times in rural areas which portrays the themes of literacy, alcohol de-addiction, health & sanitation, dowry menace, and superstitions.

There have been many experiments with health themes too. Many *prasangas* were composed and staged in order to create awareness against AIDS. *Ghora Maraka* of Amrit Someshwara and Bhaskar Rai Kukkuvalli has been successful both among Kannada and Tulu audience, which has been staged even outside Karnataka. *Swayamvara*, *Rasika Chandana*, *Mahamari Rajayaksha*, *Sheela Sankranti* too have the same subject.

There have been Yakshaganas even on Malaria, Chikungunya, cancer, leprosy, polio and H1N1. Kadri Navaneet Shetty had composed *Sanjeevini*, while Bhaskar Rai Kukkuvalli had composed '*Gunyasura Vadhe*' when Chikungunya was a prominent menace in coastal Karnataka in 2008. *Mohini Charitre*, *Dhoomrapatra Prasanga*, *Tambaku Mahatme* are the prasangas with anti-tobacco theme.

It is interesting to note that Yakshagana has been effectively performing its role as a medium of social education from the very beginning, much before the emergence of modern themes. The reason for this is, Indian mythologies are themselves rich with educative and cultural values which are necessary for the society in general. A sensitive creative artiste can create awareness among the audience even while performing mythological plots with his timely interpretations.

It would not be inappropriate, for example, to propagate the issues of environmental protection in *Panchavati*, and the importance of education in *Ekalavya* with timely improvisations. Scholars like Amrit Someshwara and Raghava Nambiar have reconstructed mythological themes with their creative outlook. *Tripura Mathana*, *Kayakalpa*, *Mahashura Bhaumasura*, *Bhuvana Bhagya* of Someshwara, *Chakreshwara Parikshita*, *Uttama Saudamini*, *Amarendra Pada Vijayi* of Raghava Nambiar can be interpreted in a newer light. There have been instances of using *Gadayuddha*, *Kamsavadhe*, *Shashiprabha Parinaya*, *Prameelarjuna*, *Gunasundari* and other prasangas towards social education.

### III. Relevance:

Perhaps, no one may oppose the idea that Yakshagana should respond to the necessities of the present. Many scholars do not oppose novelty in subjects as time changes. Their concern is that to what extent the subjects fit to the temperament of Yakshagana. "Performance of an art should not be an arbitrary behavior. There should be sufficient alertness, relevance and discretion when experiments of an art – that has reached particular standard- are done on stage" notes Someshwara (2013).

According to Joshi (2015), the subject should fit to the recital, dance, costumes and stage processes of Yakshagana. Dramatic possibilities are a must. Therefore the point should be called suitability to become Yakshagana rather than being mythological.

Yakshagana cannot cover itself in the past traditions without considering the affairs of the contemporary world. If so, it becomes only an aimless decorative conversation. It is the social responsibility of Yakshagana to respond to the modern miseries, opines Someshwara (2013). "Composing *prasangas* choosing themes from among

environmental pollution, dominance of violence, harassment of women and children, racial discriminations, population explosion, inequality, caste differences, exploitation, fatal diseases, superstition, evil habits, over mechanization, scarcity of water and fuel, etc will be timely. Art should take the responsibility of adding beauty and essence, and timely values to life” (Someshwara, 2013).

#### IV. Conclusion:

Selecting subjects from mythology itself while composing prasangas of social education is an important possibility. This would help retaining the sense of Yakshagana in modern prasangas. “If suitable subjects are available, it is better to compose prasangas in the mythological way. It is the responsibility of the author and the artistes to compose prasangas and perform the same without harming the aura of Yakshagana” says Someshwara (2013). There is a need to strike a balance between the preservation of the identity of Yakshagana and its social responsibility. The subject and style of films are not inevitable to an art that has been evolving over centuries.

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