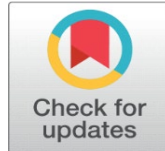
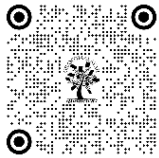


# DECODING YAKSHAGANA: UNVEILING THE SEMIOTIC SECRETS OF A TRADITIONAL ART FORM

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## ABSTRACT

From time immemorial literature and art have exercised immense fascination for those who have been endowed with aesthetic sensibility. Every art form has its origin in the basic instinct of man. As life is made varied and complex by geographical conditions, climate, ethnicity, food habits and so on, art and literature have varied manifestations. The essential basis of art is the psychic modulations of the person who creates it and enjoys it. The primary aim of all art is to impart a higher form of aesthetic experience which is an aesthetic transformation of mundane reality. India has a unique cultural tradition unparalleled in the history of any nation. Right from the beginning, Indian art and literature have been produced in accordance with the rules of aesthetics known as 'saundarya sastara' or 'rasa sastara'. Indian aesthetics is a relentless stream of aesthetic exuberance. It is both a theory and practice. As a theory it has its complexities. But in practice this caters to the artistic creativity of the writer. A work of art, consciously or unconsciously follow some of the principles of Indian aesthetics. In other words, every art form can be explained in terms of one or the other of the principles of art which manifest the motive of the characters involved.

**Keywords:** Art form, Indian Aesthetics, Saundarya Sastara, Semiotics and Yakshagana

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Drama, being the foremost form that blends literature and art provides an amicable fusion of poetry, dancing and music. A dramatist is one who has an equal command over all these ingredients of art. Hence the objective of drama is greater than other branches of art. It is the expression of human sentiment in which actors play their parts assigned to them and utter the written dialogues. It is both visual and auditory exercise. In a drama, the actor imitates the activities by the action and speech. It demands the involvement of various things such as dramatic art, direction, stage setting, music and action. The primary duty of a dramatist is to cater to the tastes and whims of the audience. Thus, the dramatist has to entertain people belonging to different age groups and having divergent temperaments. A drama

serves its full purpose when the author, the actor and the stage manager complement each other to produce the total effect.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Performance of Yakshagana Traditional Folk Dance

From the time immemorial to the present, literature and art have exercised immense fascination for those who have been endowed with aesthetic sensitivity. Every art form has its origin from the basic instinct of men. As life is made varied and complex by geographical conditions, Climate, Ethnicity, Food habits, and so on, art and literature have varied manifestations. The essential basis of arts is psychic modulations of the persons who create it and enjoys it. The primary aim of all art is to impact a higher form of aesthetic experience which is an aesthetic transformation of mundane reality. India has a rich and unique cultural tradition, unparalleled in the history of any country.

The words 'culture' and 'cultural' are used in all literacy discussion in the modern context. Culture and civilization in its wake brought forth globalisation and even homogenised culture. Individual customs which contribute to the making of culture do not have much existence today. Speaking against the changes pertaining to a uniform culture, the need for protecting individuals-culture was emphasized by the world council itself. Tradition and culture of a society cannot be retained if people work for an amalgamation of culture. By retaining the folk, classical and regional cultures, several aspects of a group of people come to the fore front so as to enable the present generation to be familiar with effects of human resources on society. Dwight Mac Donald in his essay *A Theory of Mass Culture* affirms that [3].

Yakshagana is a theatrical form of presenting mythical, historical and legendary stories that have once been popular in a particular region. The word has its origin from the term 'Yaksh' meaning 'Demi-God' and 'Gana' meaning Song. The artists wear colourful, attractive and vegetative costumes. They also wear captivating headgear. This performance demands stage requirements for its wonderful performance. In some way or the other it resembles the western type of opera. It is believed that this cultural and religious dance had its origin in the coastal district of Karnataka in connection with the 'Vishnu Bhakti' movement in the 11th century. In the 13th century, a sage named Narahari Thirtha started 'Desavathara' performance in 'Uduppi' which later developed into the proper art form of the dance-cum musical performance 'Yakshagana'.

This art form is so live with performance full of dance and drama. The poetic songs in this dance form are sung by the chief musician known as the 'Bhagavatha' who controls the narrative. The performance of 'Yakshagana' begins with a prelude

called the 'Sabhalakshana' followed by the 'Prasanga'. It also includes background music played by a group of musicians known as 'Himalaya'. The background music consists of a mix of drums, pipes and other organs. The 'Prasangas' or stories are mostly based on the Hindu epics such as the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas. Yakshagana also performs significant events of the lives of historical legends. Diverse mythical characters, historical legends and various incarnations of gods and goddesses take the spectator in to the world of magnificent charm that it profoundly gives the kind of aesthetics satisfaction with which they are in a state of 'calm of mind all passion spent'.

## 2. HISTORY AND PERFORMANCE

It is generally a custom among the Yakshagana acting troupes in South India to give the first performance on the 'Deepavali' day in the temple they are attached to. These performances unravel the myth of Kubera, the King of 'Yakshas' who got back his wealth from 'Bali' on the Deepavali day. Hence the 'Yakshas' sing and dance in joy of expressing pleasure. During the dawn of 16th century these art forms was patronised by the rulers and the poets. Musicians and the dancers explored the umpteen mythical stories from Epics and 'puranas' for the flourishing of this dance form. Yakshagana performance generally begins in the twilight of the day with beating of the drum initially of many fixed compositions. And this may last up to an hour before the actors arrive in style with rich costumes, head dresses and face paints. The dance is performed behind the curtain held by the 'Bhagavata' after which the actors present different dances all to the same tune. It is through the Bhagavata the performance revolves as in the form of conversation and they introduce the actors with the song of 'prasanga' and then the performance continues and each character with distinctive entrance comes to the front of the performing space. The song is sung in the green room and moved to the stage by the Bhagavata and the 'chorus'.

The singers express every human feeling through the songs with simple words with a recurring beauty that appeals to the spectators. The composers usually take up themes of varied human strife that succeed equally. Through limited ragas, they convey the themes of love, anger, fear, jealous passion, joy and compassion that are in everyday life of common men. Bhagavata sings to accompaniment of 'Sruti' by playing a pair of small 'cymbals'. The singer sticks to the high pitch with every song with spoken language accompanied by dance performance of Yakshagana actors.

## 3. STAGE SETUP

The stage crafts of Yakshagana is wonderful. The direction and colourful makeup, the pattern of light and shade all are designed to present the character as larger than life. These costumes, colours of makeup, the song and the light all are brilliant and extraordinary. Umpteen kinds of ornaments are used to decorate the shoulders, the chest, the face, and the arms. Masks are not used except for symbolic purpose. The use of colour in the facial dressing is also significant. This colour is the colour of the terrible. Dark colour suggests the erotic and the tender and the headgear is also imperative as it suggest different connotative and denotative symbols.

Lighting in the yakshagana has two functions. It intends to illuminate the stage and move importantly to create the mood and control the focus of the spectators. During earlier days oil lamps were used to illuminate the performance. The light given by the lamps give an effect and did not irritate the eyes even when exposed

for long durations. Today oil lamps are replaced by electrical bulbs that has provided as opportunity to achieve dramatic effects. Music is an integral part of Yakshagana as the words of the songs and the poems tell the story of the performance. The rhythms of these songs dictate the mood of the performance. It is also possible to create various moods among the audience various instruments such as 'tala' (cymbals) 'Maddale' a small barrel shaped drum, 'chenda' a cylindrical drum played with sticks and as special kind of instrument called the 'Shritiburude' are used for the performance.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Stage Play of Yakshagana

This art form was developed from several forms of traditional rituals and different regions. It is classified into categories such as folk classical or rural. It is more varied and dynamic than most dance forms. The important aspects of Yakshagana are raga, tala, literature, costumes and ornaments, head gears, shoulder plates, and Breast plates. The melodic frame work used in Yekshagana is 'Raga'. It is based on pre-classical melodic forms that comprise a serious of five or more notes on which a melody is found. Ragas in Yakshagana are closely associated with asset of melodic forms called 'mattu'. The 'tala' is part of 'raga' that decide how a composition is to be enacted by the dancers. It is similar to 'tala' in other forms of Indian music. The literature of yakshagana poetry is a collection of poems written to form a musical drama. The poems are composed in well-known Kanada meters, using a framework of 'ragas' and 'talas'. The collection of Yakshagana poems forming a musical drama is called 'prasanga'.

The costumes of Yakshagana are rich in colourful. The costumes of 'Vesha' in Kannada depend on characters depicted in the play, it also depends on the Yakshagana style. The ornaments and masks including headgear are made of metals and wood. The costumes consist of headgear (Krita or Pagede), 'Kavacha', that decorates the chest 'bujakeerthi' (armlets) that decorates the shoulders and belts (Dabu). These all are made up of light wood and covered with golden foil. The wonderful mirror works on these ornamental helps to enhance its appeal and reflect light during performance. They add more colour to the costumes. These ornaments covered almost the upper part of the actor and the lower half of the body of the performer is covered with 'kachehe', which comes in unique contributions of red, yellow, and orange checks.

The female characters or 'sthreeveshas' make use of sari and other decorative ornaments. Costumes give the information about the performer and the story. The costumes are made of traditional Palghat and Karnataka sarees with checks. In the case of male characters, the lower pants are typical in the stage called the 'Kasevastra'. The top is a blouse which is hardly seen as it is covered with ornaments. One end of the shawl is tied at the back of the headgear and the other end tied to the waist. The 'Rakshasa' characters look very distinctive due to his headgear which resembles the Kathakali style of headgears. There are separate costumes, ornaments and headgears of good characters and bad characters. From the dress one can detect whether the character is a good one or bad (demonic) one. Similarly, the breast plates of characters are varied according to vice and virtue of persons who represents it. Yakshagana is broadly divided into the following types.

Moodalopayyakshagana: This type of Yakshagana are common in eastern areas of Karnataka, Ngamandala Taluk of the Mandya district and North Karnataka. Paduvlopaya Yakshagana are popular in western part of extended Karnataka (Kasargod, Dakshina Kannada, Udupi and Uttara Kannada). Tenkutittu is popular in the areas of Kasargod (Kerala) Mangalore district, Udupi, Sulliya, Puttur, Bantwale, Karkala etc. Badagutittu: These varieties are common in Kundapura area, Uttara Kannad District. Badabadagutittu is popular in extreme north part of Uttara Karnataka. Nevertheless, all these varieties of Yakshagana are the typical of Karnataka language tradition that upholds the legacy of a rich, vibrant, exuberant and grand tradition of Karnataka cult. Performing art forms, have always been the most direct expressions of a society's existential beliefs, in addition to being the most natural means of entertainment, stress relief as well as symbolically instructive, especially the various forms of dance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Indian classical dances are all based on an ancient, innate aesthetic yearning, which compulsively stretches human vision into realms far beyond the seen, the analysed, the labelled and defined world, into almost concrete sensations of timeless continuities. In this world of sublime sensitivities, the mysteries of life are approached through feelings, rather than by intellect. Yet, the classical forms of dance are interpreted as a 'body language' only, by a vast majority, and in the so called developing urban society, the eternal values, and the everlasting significance of 'nitha, nrithya, naatya' are being dangerously underplayed. The social status of those who take up dancing as a profession, is also relatively subservient to those who choose technical fields.

#### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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