



## The Yakshagana of Karnataka

K. Shivram Karanth

The Kannada-speaking area of India, usually called Karnataka, has a rich theatre form known as 'Yakshagana'. In earlier times it used to be called 'Bhagavatara ata', 'Dashavatara ata', or simply 'Bayalata'. In Kannada 'ata' means a play. Originally this form of theatre used to deal with the tales of Bhagavan Krishna and hence the name 'Bhagavatara ata'. Later on, it began to depict tales of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu; hence the name 'Dashavatara ata'. Being an open-air theatre, it came to be called 'Bayalata'. The nomenclature 'Yakshagana' came from a special style of music which accompanies these plays. It is a very ancient style, for there is mention of this style in Kannada literature of the tenth and twelfth

centuries. The *Chandraprabha Purana* (1189) makes mention of the form. Nagachandra's *Mallinatha Purana* (1105) refers to Yakshagana as "pleasing to Lakshmi who stands in the lotus". In the sixteenth century Kavi Ratnakar Varni speaks of *Yakkalagana* in his *Bharateshavaibhava*. Since he belongs to the region of South Kanara, it may be surmised that the Yakshagana form was widespread by that time.

Yakshagana embraced in earlier times a form of music played before royal personages. Later on, owing to the advent of more evolved styles of music like Hindustani and Karnatic music, Yakshagana receded very much into the background. We would have totally lost this form, but for the fact that opera-like plays began to be written in this style and their stage success contributed to its survival right to this day. In the Kannada country we have over three hundred Yakshagana plays, written by a number of writers, from at least the period of the sixteenth century. The tradition of staging such plays has continued over the past few centuries, evolving its own peculiar stage techniques.

An essential feature of these plays is that the play is conceived as a fantasy dealing with heroes, gods and demons; the material chosen for depiction comes from our myths and legends. Such stories are moralistic in outlook and often portray the victory of good over evil. Most of our traditional drama leans heavily on such legendary lore. The special distinction of Yakshagana consists in its presentation of the story through the medium of music, dance and literature.

The very backbone of Yakshagana is its operatic nature; songs and verses are employed for the narration of its themes. This is done sometimes in the third person, and often in the first and second persons. The songs consist of many musical patterns, composed to express every type of emotion contained in the puranic stories. The language is simple and direct, and can easily be understood by lay audiences. The *Bhagavathar*, or conductor of the play, has to sing all those songs (in addition to many narrative verses) to the accompaniment of cymbals and drums.

The *purva ranga* of the performance is known as *Sabha-lakshana*. It begins with a prayer to Ganesha, Skanda and other deities. The *Bhagavathar* is, of course, the leader. Next to him in importance is the character who plays heroic or serious roles. Those who perform the parts of demons are known as *bannada vasha*. (Colour is *banna* (*varna*) in Kannada). The *stree-vesha* is lower down in the scale. The *Bhagavathar* is at the apex. The two accompanying instruments, the *chande* and the *maddale*, are an aid, but it is he who controls the rhythm and the pace. The *Bhagavathar* introduces each character; when a character is alone on the stage and seeks to express his feelings, it is the *Bhagavathar* who listens to his problems. The *shruti* determines the note of the *Bhagavathar* and the *shruti* box is by his side throughout the performance. Even when the music is silent, the dialogue continues to be based on this particular note and has its own mode of presentation. The din of the *chande* becomes more pronounced during a war sequence or in moments of elation or vigorous movement.

Another feature of the earlier part of the performance is the Balagopala (Krishna-Balarama) dance. Then there is always a comic interlude. Hanumanayaka comes with his band of urchins. These young monkeys are the *kodangi* and their *nayaka* (leader) is Hanuman. Even as the *Bhagavathar* sings the praises of Ganesha, Hanumanayaka and his followers forge ahead with their own brand of humour. They repeat the pattern during the moments when Skanda and Shiva-Parvati are praised. Then the *stree-vesha* enter; they dance and sing, concentrating on the *shringara rasa*.

The *Sabha-lakshana* terminates and the *Prasanga* proper begins. It is introduced by the *vaddolaga*. The character, who is about to enter, stands behind a curtain and he is presented to the spectators. If a Mahabharata story is to be enacted, the Pandavas are presented through the *vaddolaga*. For example, Hanumanayaka speaks the *birudavali* of Dharmaraja. He hails him thus: *Shrikrishnasuprita, Duritavamshavidhata, Trailokyavikhyata, Sakalavaninatha, Sharanasankuladhata, Kamakrodhavidhata, Ajatashatruavadata, Sarvashastradhita Saddharma Pariputa, Shrimadrajakulakulimandita, Padpadmaradantha, Dharmaraja Maharaja*. There are traditional songs associated with a *vaddolaga*. For instance, Krishna's *vaddolaga* begins with a Sanskrit *shloka* and is followed by a song in *raga* Sankarabharana, *tala* Adi. The *vaddolaga* of the demons is a more spectacular affair; the dance is more slow and is punctuated by roars and cries. Popular *prasangas* like the Karna-Arjuna Yuddha are eagerly awaited by the audience.

Kannada works based on Sanskrit compositions form the source of these *prasangas*. These include Kumar Vyasa's *Bharata*, Torwe Narhari's *Ramayana* and Battaleshwara's *Kaushik Ramayana* and *Bhagvata Katha*. It is through them that village audiences make their earliest acquaintance with our epic forms. The heroic *prasangas* which feature battles have the word *kalga* incorporated into their titles. They include *Babhruvahana Kalga, Sudhanvana Kalga, Marimukha Kalga* and other *kalgas*. Those that end in marital bliss have the word *Kalyana* or *Parinaya* inserted in the title. For example, *Subhadra Parinaya* or *Kanakangi Parinaya*. Of course, the humorous element of a performance is wholly monopolised by Hanumanayaka. The *Sabha-lakshana* introduces us to the choreography of the Balagopala and *stree-vesha* sequences. The *vaddolaga* includes excellent group formations in its dance.

Various metres fulfil a particular function. For instance, the Kannada metre *Kanda*, based on the Sanskrit *Arya*, helps to speed up the pace of a narrative. *Vritta* is used when deities are praised. *Dvipadi* and *Bhamini Shatpadi* are employed for telling a story. Yakshagana is never too ornate and some of the songs like those in the *Shrikrishna Balalila* borrow heavily from folk songs. The famous *prasanga* of Chandravali composed by Kavi Nagappaya of Dhvajapura has elements of love and pathos, and a touching simplicity of mood. The *Bhagavathar* resorts to prose particularly when something exciting is expected to happen.

Yakshagana music at one time employed as many as one hundred and fifty *ragas* and about seven *talas* in its musical patterns (*Dhatis*). Today's *Bhagavathars* have forgotten most of these *ragas*; even so the musical patterns:

that have survived are numerous enough to depict forcefully the many different moods of these plays. If all the earlier *ragas* could be revived now, we would experience again the operatic excellence of this form. There is a richness and potency in the *ragas* and *talas* used; they are able to convey various shades of thought and feeling. In classical music, both Hindustani and Karnatic, we have numerous *ragas*, but their thought content is generally devotional or sad in its nature. It embraces the wail of a devotee, self-castigation or praise of one's personal deity. Even in the aspect of love, it is the *viraha* element (the pangs of separation and the yearning for the presence of the lover who has vanished from sight) that predominates. A drama cannot restrict itself to these emotions alone. It has to deal with other human feelings like anger, jealousy, rage or joy. It cannot limit its emotional core to pathos, devotion or praise. The Yakshagana composer, therefore, found greater opportunities for composing expressive patterns which could also lend themselves to rhythmical dance expression.

In Yakshagana some of the *ragas* have Karnatic names (Gaula, for instance). Others have a wholly Kannada flavour—Koravi, Mechali or Gopanite. The Koravi is close to the Kurunji of Karnatic music. Dvijavanti is like the Hindustani Jaijaiwanti; Pahadi is like Pahadi. Assembling some of our traditional *Bhagavathars* and with the help of classical scholars (in both the Karnatic and Hindustani styles), I was able to discover more than sixty *ragas*, whose patterns our *Bhagavathars* can recollect still, but whose names they have forgotten. Not being sure of their scales, they often migrate from *raga* to *raga*; at times they tend to be monotonous. We realized that whenever an old composition (set in a particular *raga*) was wittingly or unwittingly changed, its expressive power seemed to wane. It is quite clear that in former times composers were experts in their musical style; whereas most of our present day *Bhagavathars* appear to have lost their moorings.

The importing of *gamaka* (style of modulation) from the Hindustani and Karnatic schools has also had an adverse effect on Yakshagana. This factor differentiated it from the other two schools. The tendency of the *Bhagavathar* to imitate Marathi stage music and the devotional songs of saints like Purandaradasa has also modified the original style and impaired its purity.

There is one element in Yakshagana which has suffered a good deal at the hands of the present-day *Bhagavathar* and his accompanists. The *Bhagavathar* tends to ignore the language-content of his song, and to concentrate for the main part on its style and *tala*. The accompanists are mainly absorbed in playing the *maddale* and *chande*. The sound of these drums drowns all the words of the song. The musicians pay little attention to thought content. The pitch of the voice and the accompanying cymbal and drum beats are shrill and piercing. The dancer necessarily follows them. Subtler feelings, the lines of demarcation between one emotion and another are wiped out in the process. Earnest attention to these aspects of music can help us to exploit the richness of Yakshagana. For a dancer it offers wonderful opportunities for expression; many of the songs portray a wide range of emotions, calling for quick changes in mood and utmost subtlety in projection.



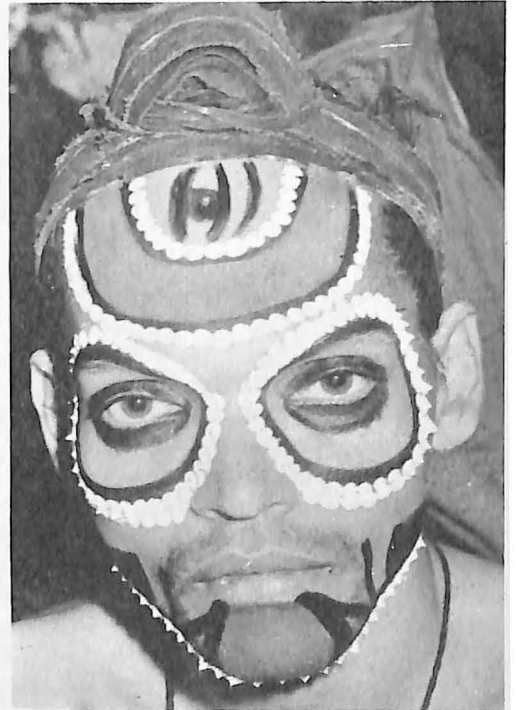
*Kamalabhupa and his daughter Rati*

The characters speak out their words in dignified prose after each song; this art has to be cultivated over long years of experience. The prose passages cannot be learnt by rote. A speech is delivered extempore and often improvised on the spur of the moment after the *Bhagavathar* has sung one stanza after the other during the course of the play. Two opposing characters, or a courting couple, can thus develop a fascinating dialogue between themselves; this is often handled with dexterity by veterans of the Yakshagana stage.

Kathakali, with its strong accent on music and the language of gesture, allows for no dialogue spoken by actors. In Yakshagana the dance element is not predominant. The story unfolds itself through the words spoken by the actors. The dance is supported by the rhythm of the *chande* and *maddale* and the pace of the *Bhagavathar*. The simple metre of the *Bhamini*

*Shatpadi* provides the dancer with the right tempo. The *stree-vesha* concentrate on the *lasya* element of the dance. The male characters display valour and fury. Hanumanayaka's movements embrace humour and joy. The dances do not depict so much of delicate emotions as the predominant mood of a sequence. They offer the rhythmic background to its delineation. Thus dance (except for the few occasions when travel, battle and valour are depicted) serves as no more than an embellishment to an otherwise prose drama. The spoken word is the main ingredient and the audiences remain passive observers of the drama enacted in front of them.

The important problem in Yakshagana is that of liberating dance from the medium of prose. Dance with music can by itself suggest quite significantly many aspects of a drama. The thought-content is in the realm of language; but emotions can also find an intense and subtle expression through music and dance. To discover these possibilities, I eschewed spoken prose altogether in my ballets. The songs did have words; they set a sequence in motion. But the dancers were taught to express their emotions in terms of footwork, body flexions, gesture, facial expressions, and choreography. This did not mean substitution of gestures for every spoken word. The minimum of commonly understood gestures was used. The entire body was turned into a vehicle of expression. Footwork was subdued or tuned up depending on the nature and pitch of the emotion. Steps were not deemed to be exercises in technical skill. *Tala* rhythms had to be a part of the dancer's body-movements and poses. The rhythms of songs had to evoke corresponding reflections in



*Headgear and Make-up in Yakshagana*

a dancer's movements. Years of study and exercise led me to the conclusion that our Indian dance has a lot to gain by accepting the fact that one medium hardly enriches itself by imitating another. Skill alone is neither art nor *shastra*; acrobatics in *raga* and *tala* cannot serve the needs of dance or musical expression.

The potential in this form can be exploited to the full and its canvas enlarged. For example, tradition has given Hanumanayaka full liberty of speech and action. He assumes light roles like those of servant, courier or messenger. He provides the element of humour in the dance. Dance developed to suit such a mood can enrich the possibilities latent in his role. Yakshagana has a few basic dance patterns but they are restricted to the performances of the main characters during the battle and travel sequences. They can be employed to embrace other situations, too.

Yakshagana surpasses many Indian theatre forms in one particular field, that is in the matter of costumes and make-up. These plays were originally conceived as fantasies, and practitioners of the form evolved a rich variety of costumes. Their design was not inspired by ancient paintings or sculpture: it is based on the essential nature of the characters. To the first category belong heroes like Karna and Arjuna or *Avatara purusha* like Rama or Krishna. The second type consists of characters of heroic mould who are a trifle too proud of their prowess and consequently slightly immature. To this class belongs Indra or Gaya (Gandharva). The third group includes those like Kirata who are fearless, yet somewhat uncultured and even stupid. Then there are demons like Ravana and Kumbhakarna who are brave in their own right but, on the whole, quite destructive in their ways. Another group includes those who are born among demons but have a code of right and wrong. Among these are Ravana's brother Vibhushana or Ravana's son Atikaya. A special kind of costume is designed for them. Then there are those deities like Veerabhadra and Narasimha who are entrusted with the difficult task of annihilating demons. Apart from the characters of this *deva-danava-manava* group, there are others like Hanuman, Bali and Jambava. Then there are straight characters, like rishis or gurus. The *stree-vesha* includes queens, princesses and attendants.

The Yakshagana performances used to take place at night. Torches were used to light the arena. The dim, yellowish flames flickered and the dazzling costumes imparted to the atmosphere a suggestion of fantasy. In the olden days *aradala* (yellow orpiment) was mixed with coconut oil and smeared over uncovered parts of the body. With the introduction of petromax lamps—a whiter shade, with a slight crimson colouring, was substituted. The area of the temples near the eyes is covered with white and outlined with streaks of red. A white *tilak* is painted on the forehead and a black line is drawn in the middle. The *stree-vesha* has a red *tilak* on the forehead. Balagopala, Lava-Kusha, Krishna have no moustaches.

The main colour for the *rakshasa* characters is red, green and black. The face is multi-coloured. Rice paste is used to outline the contours and after many such layers, the face begins to have a solid, three-dimensional effect. The face

looks even larger when it is framed by a strip of paper, cut into sharp, teeth-like shapes and tied behind the ears.

Those playing the roles of rishis or purohits are usually simply clad. The clothing for all the characters is effective; the ornaments are elaborate and dazzling. Special types of headgear correspond to the nature of the characters portrayed in the play. Every foreign student of the theatre, who has witnessed Yakshagana plays, has gone into raptures over its costume and make-up. It can stand comparison with the best in their Balinese, Javanese or Cambodian counter-parts. Unfortunately decadence slowly set in in the matter of costumes, particularly in the style of clothing worn by female characters. The desire to cater to popular taste resulted in their being presented like fashionable ladies of the times. Female figures looked like women on the street straying on to the stage from among the crowd. Re-designing appropriate costumes and ornaments for them has now become an urgent task and I have sought to introduce suitable patterns and colours for the sari and other apparel used by female characters. I have also tried to design a few ornaments to blend with those of the male characters. A number of early plays have stopped being performed and the costumes and make-up of characters like Vali, Hanuman, Jambava, Nandi and Garuda have been totally or partially forgotten. I am now making an attempt, with the help of veteran artists, to fill in this gap and introduce improvements in this sphere.

There is an enthusiasm for the 'new' and the 'latest' and many troupes have made it a point to stage novel and fanciful plays. But the writers seem to lack talent and shabby musical structures are produced as a result. They do not realize that new types of characters need intricate and well-designed costumes and make-up. Imitating the professional stage or the cinema will not help matters.

To get a clear picture of what Yakshagana is, all one has to do is to experience its artistic wealth. This rich variety cannot be expected of every troupe. Every play cannot fulfil a rigorous standard. Today the aesthetic elements of this theatre have been renounced by those votaries of the bizarre who have no sense of colour or harmony. Even so, there are a few temple troupes which still retain much of what is best in the old tradition.

The village audiences, who for centuries appreciated and patronised the traditional Yakshagana, now find it stale; their patronage has shifted to those cheap and garrulous productions that profess to be Yakshagana. Lack of aesthetic perception has contributed to this state of affairs. In earlier days, traditions were considered sacred and nobody dared to tamper with a given form. A more sensible government or the existence of discerning patrons could have helped in the task of preserving Yakshagana as a national asset. State troupes could have come into existence and this heritage (which is now in the hands of commercially-minded individuals and novelty-chasing audiences, who regard it as a form of escape) would have thus been conserved in its authentic state.