

Puranic sources of Yakshagana

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Yakshagana, the traditional art form of Karnataka, draws themes mainly from *puranas* like *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagavatha* and others. Usually one particular story is selected and the poet depicts the story in verses in different metres, which can be sung in different *ragas* and *talas*. Some of them are sung without using *tala* too. For example the meters *bhamini*, *vardhaka*, *kanda* etc. This semi dramatic poem is called *prasanga*, may mean contextual story, for example *krishnasandhana*, is a *prasanga*, which narrates the story of *udyogaparva* of *Mahabharata*. *Bhishmaparva*, narrates the episode of *Bhishma* as in *Mahabharata*.

It is a fact that many of the Yakshagana poets were ordinary people with minimum education. Pundits were rare to find, but they had good knowledge of old Kannada and were well versed in middle Kannada literature. Their thorough reading of *Kumaravyasa*, *Lakshmisha* and *Narahari* is evident from their works. They follow them in narrating the story. But at some times they differ from the original with some purpose.

The purpose is dramatic. Yakshagana is a stage art. It requires stage worthiness of the story part. Therefore they select the stage worthy part of the story and develop that

part elaborately and abridge the non stage worthy part. We don't know whether they have read *Bharata* or not, but have followed his rules. in Sanskrit dramas we find prelude ,interlude etc to tell us the necessary part of the story. There some minor characters enter and supply the necessary information to the audience. But here ,in Yakshagana we don't find such techniques, *bhagavata* , the main singer himself briefs the story in vachana –i.e. poetical prose or in metrical form using *dvipadi*, *vardhaka*, *bhamini* or in other metres of different *talas*. There is no such rule that he should use only such and such a metre. The poet has freedom to use the metre according to his will and wish. the singer sings the song written in the script.

The dialogue part is usually unwritten. Here the actor has restricted freedom. He is expected to deliver his dialogues on the basis of the song sung by the singer. He is expected to elaborate the meaning of the song. It resembles the relation between aphorism and commentary on it. The commentators always claim that we are explaining and elaborating the aphorism and here also the actor claims the same. The difference is that commentator always remains a third person. But here the actor has a dual role i.e. commentator and character. Suppose an actor playing the role of *Dushyanta* talks like *Dushyanta* sometimes and explains his own speech like a commentator. This dual role has many advantages. With the help of it he connects the past with the present. At the time of Indian freedom

movement many artists playing different roles talked against the government and aroused nationality in the heart of people. Even now they record their reactions on contemporary issues in their dialogues in an intelligent way. That is a different subject to be studied. What is relevant here is actor come commentator himself fulfils the role of connecting scattered part of the story. The character which enters on the stage tells the necessary story part in his dialogue or monologue to the audience to help them to appreciate the episode.

Yakshagana poets usually follow their epic source in major details, we have already told. But even then they make some minor changes mostly for the purpose of entertaining the larger public. It is a popular theatre and people have supported and influenced a lot on its development. They expect entertainment of a higher quality from the performers as in other art forms. That enjoyment is called *rasa* in *Natyashastra* of *Bharata* and his followers. Depiction of *rasa* is the sole purpose of any art. Yakshagana is no exception. So the poets try to develop situations depicting different *rasas*. Most of the episodes are called *kalagas* or battles; some others are called *kalyanas* or marriages, where marriage occurs after battle and becomes minor like entrance of police in modern films. Poets create different situations to break the monotony of *rasa*, without disturbing the main theme. For example a messenger, an old Brahmin, old prostitute, washer man,

hunter, drunken man, mad person etc. these characters are used to create humour. It is a comic relief to the serious temper.

Some new situations are introduced to show the variety of characterization and to bring new *rasa*. For example in the episode of *Abhimanyu*, he goes to his mother *Subhadra* before going to war. This particular scene has no place in the original epic. He, just goes to war and after valorously fighting against enemies, dies on the battlefield. But here his mother forbids him from going to battle field in different ways in a pathetic way, but *Abhimanyu* consoles her and takes her permission. This is a pathetic scene, which exhibits motherly feelings effectively. We find such scenes in many other *prasangas* also, addition or deletion of such scenes have nothing to do with main story, just supports it. In the *prasanga Karnaparva*, *Vrishasena*, son of *Karna* comes near *Duryodhana* and asks permission to go to war. King *Duryodhana* tries prevent him and gives his consent afterwards. This is a scene created by the poet, which is not found in the original source. Such scenes enhance the beauty of the episode.

Yakshagana poets are fond of water sport and moving in gardens called *vanavihara*. Whenever possible they introduce such situations. Because it gives scope for dance. Most of heroes meet the heroine in garden while plucking flowers and fall in love. It is believed to be an ideal situation to fall in love. Hunting the animals also is a

popular scene. The poet cannot neglect the stage requirement is a point to be noted. These are minor changes.

When the original story supplies little information, the poets fill the gap with their own imagination. *Bhishmavijaya* is an example. The episode is taken from *Ambopakhyana* of *Mahabharata*. The story appears in *Adiparva* and *Udyogaparva* with some contradictory details, still lack clarity. But the poet Narasimha shastry fulfils the gap and has created an everlasting *prasanga*, which is one of the popular *prasanga*. He has introduced new characters like *Ekalavya*, *Dhrudhavarma*, *Suketu* and so many others. King *Salva* becomes a semi-demon, *Amba's* meeting with *Salva*, her watersport etc., are creations of the poet. He has transformed a rough stone into a beautiful sculpture. The poet's dramatic sense plays an important role in creating such works. Poet with less imagination just follows the original source without thinking. Such *prasangas* seldom appear on the stage.

As we know, *puranas* are not poems. Their purpose is not aesthetic rapture. Their purpose is to show the right path to the people at large and mere advice bores. So they tell us interesting stories. It is like giving sugarcoated pills. That's why they are called *mitrasammita* i.e. giving advice like a friend. A friend never orders to do or not to do. *Yakshagana* also had such purpose in olden days. People were illiterate. *Yakshagana* took the responsibility of educating the people

through stories presented in dramatic form, as it has more equipments to attract the people at large more successful in achieving the purpose. It is evident from seeing people belonging to Yakshagana area. Even an illiterate of Yakshagana area knows the *purana* story very well than other people. The culture of the area is deeply influenced by these stories. Even now Yakshagana is a source of knowledge for many people. They go to Yakshagana to increase their knowledge of *puranas*. And take moral lessons from the plays.

That is the reason why Yakshagana poets do not want to change the story part according to their will. There are hundreds of dramas based on *Ramayana* in Sanskrit and every poet differs from the original and presents the story in a different way. Because they were in the courts of kings and their plays were displayed before the educated courtiers. For them the story was of less importance. Their sole purpose was aesthetic pleasure. So they had the liberty to change the story. Yakshagana developed in a different situation and had an additional responsibility. Therefore they hesitated to change the story and show much adherence to *puranas*. Even today we find people who go to the theatre for knowing the mythological stories and they vehemently oppose any change from the original.

Some modern poets have written works on one character. That is collecting different events belonging to one person for example *Karna*. The *prasanga* is on the main character

is *Karna*. The poet narrates story from the standpoint of *Karna*. It starts from his birth and ends in his death. All the events occurred in his life is woven together. Sometimes the story begins from previous birth or births. *Trijanmamoksha*, depicts the story of *Kamsa*, beginning from *Kalanemi*. They are character oriented works and give us information about the person in detail. Same story can be looked from different angles. The *Ramayana* may be looked upon from *Sita's* angle or from *Valmiki's* angle, then meaning of the work may change.

Some poets collect the story from different sources and deliver it in a coherent manner that suits to him. The great *Partisubba* has written *prasangas* based on *Rama* story, collecting information from different sources. While writing *sitaviyoga*, He took information from poets like *Valmiki*, *Kalidasa*, *Bhavabhuti* and *Lakshmisha*. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have hundreds of versions and different versions give different pictures. Every language has its own version and we find different versions within one language speaking area also. *Yakshagana* poets have written *prasangas* taking subjects from popular *puranas* also. *Draupadi pratapa*, *Ramanjaneya*, *Krishnarjuna*, *Ratikalyana (kaundlikavadha)*, *Kanakangikalyana* and etc. these works are based on popular versions.

We don't find these stories in standard versions or original work. They are from sources unknown but people never question their authenticity. But there is unwritten code of

conduct that these stories or events occurred in such stories should not be mentioned while playing other stories. That is strictly prohibited. They are considered as *puranas* of dubious origin and can't claim the same respect.

Yakshagana poets enjoy the same liberty enjoyed by other poets handling puranic source. Nobody prevents him. He can follow or unfollow the source; he can insert new themes or create an episode to enhance beauty or delete some events. He has the liberty in depicting the demon as demigod. You can make *Ravana*, a good person, great lover who is ready to sacrifice the whole empire etc. people may accept it if not fully, accept with some grudging, but they never accept the depiction of *Rama* as bad or wicked. His greatness should not be tainted. Good person should remain as good, bad may change a bit. While using puranic source the poet's liberty should not cross this limit. Within this broader frame work the poet has liberty to change the original story.

Yakshagana *prasanga* tells the story in dramatic form. The dialogues of characters and description of the poet. The descriptive part of the *prasanga* poem has its own importance as it supplies necessary information about situation. The entry of the character is always in descriptive form. For example, *Krishna* enters with the song "*bandanu devara deva*" (god of god has come) and the actor dances according to rhythm and acts. Nobody objects,

because they know the tradition of the art. It is coherent with the dual role of actor i.e. character and interpreter or commentator. The poet's viewpoint about the character is shown here. For example, In *Bhishmavijaya* poet says "*parama dushcharitreyambeyu- amba*, the wicked character". That is the opinion of the poet about the character of *Amba*. It helps the actor and gives direction about depicting the role. The psychological condition of the character also is known example, "*kandu satiyala bhrantugodu* –after seeing the lady being infatuated". Because *bhagavatha*- the singer is the storyteller and actors are his instruments like puppets in puppet show. In a way actors are living puppets who behave as he wishes. Therefore the question of impropriety doesn't arise. We can understand the standpoint of the poet, his intention and interpretation of the puranic situation from this descriptive part.

The dialogue portion is more important because drama develops with dialogues. That is the heart of a drama. The *Natya shastra* calls it *vachikabhinaya*. Here dialogues are written in poetic form and the actor reproduces it in prose form. Here he has liberty to expand the meaning of the poem. The prose dialogue is unwritten and extemporary in its nature. The actor himself is dialogue writer. So it differs as actors differ. Poet gives the outline and actor interprets it. He speaks sometimes like the character, say *Dushyanta* or *Rama* and sometimes he talks like his interpreter. He

brings out the finer points of the poem. The poet knows it very well. Therefore he writes the dialogue like sutra (aphorism) which can be expanded. For example while fighting *Karna* says –

“Elavo partha kelu kalavinalli sindhu nripana gelida pariyidalla nodu nillu samarake”

{oh *Arjuna*, this is not the type of war, where you have conquered king of *Sindhu*, *Jayadratha*. Come on fight with me.}

Here the verse is very simple. It refers to the killing of *Jayadratha* by *Arjuna*. *Karna* points out the dubious method used by *Arjuna* at that time. It is cheating according to *Karna*. To prove his point he tells the story in detail and *Arjuna* defends his stand. Arguments and counter arguments take place for some time. Then *Arjuna* attacks *Karna* on his deed –

“kalavinalli bengadeyolu karada billa kadida jivagallanendu balle gograhana dinadali”

{I know you are a coward, you cut the bow of *Abhimanyu* from the backside and your valor is well known at the time of *gograhana*, catching of cows from northern side.

Here he refers to the slaughter of *Abhimanyu* his son. *Karna* cuts his bow from the backside to kill him. This is a cowardly act according to *Arjuna* and he refers to

gograhana war, where *Arjuna* singlehandedly fought against *Kauravas* including *Karna* and won.

Here each and every issue of the story is discussed. Each character tries to defend his position vehemently with the help of his scholarship. While debating his knowledge of puranic lore and logical ability is tested. Such debates and dialogues have much scope in *talamaddale* or *baithak*, another form of Yakshagana, which is performed without dress, make up and dance. But the discussion should not go beyond the frame work of the poem in question. Arguments and counter arguments have full scope within the frame work. If one crosses the given boundary he loses the sympathy of listeners. People listening to their discussion point out even a small mistake. The person will be a laughing stock.

Yakshagana tries to show the puranic world to modern man is evident from every aspect. It draws story from *puranas* or literature resembling *purana*. The dress and make up are designed in that way is a point to be noted. They are not realistic but symbolic. They speak in a different style and use an elevated language. An ordinary man looks extraordinary in that make up. With limited stage equipment, Yakshagana artist transform an open ground into puranic world with the help of dress, make up, music and dance. The dialogues and delivery style strengthens it. Being a spectator is a worth experience.

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(Deceased Soul on April 2021 Due to covid 19. He was President, Karnataka Yakshagana Academy, Retired Principal, Sanskrit and Yakshagana scholar, Poet and Artiste, Humanitarian. Salutations to him.)

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