Folk Theatre of India: Yakshagana



Yakshagana is a traditional folk art developed in the western parts of Chikmagalur districts in Karnataka and Kasaragod district in Kerala. Yakshagana comprises music, dance, theatre, costumes, and makeup with a blend of unique style and forms.[1] It is said to have evolved from pre-classical music forms and theatrical arts during the Bhakti movement. Yakshgana is referred to as 'Thenku thittu' towards the south from Dakshina Kannada to Kasaragod in Tamil Nadu, whereas it is referred to as 'Badaga Thittu' north of Udupi.[1] Both of these forms are equally played all over the region. Yakshagana is inspired by ancient Hindu literature like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and other Hindu and Jain epics. Yaksha-gana means the song (gana) of a Yaksha. Yakshas were an exotic tribe mentioned in Sanskrit literature.[1]

Yakshagana is a product of the Vaishnava bhakti movement, which originated in southern India from the fifth to the seventh centuries. It emphasizes the love and devotion for Lord Vishnu as the chief means for spiritual perfection.[2] Existing folk music and dances were adopted to create new performing arts to spread and propagate the message of love

and devotion among the common folk. Yakshagana is also a result of this blend of existing dance and drama.



A Yakshagana performance usually consists of background music played by a group of musicians and percussionists, also known as the himmela and a dance and dialogue group known as the mummela, who together enact poetic epics on stage.[1]



In the early 19th century, Yakshagana began to see a significant change from its traditional strict forms.

Practitioners of the day produced several new compositions. The early 20th century saw the birth of ‘tent’ troupes, giving performances to audiences admitted by ticket only. Gas lights were replaced with electrical lights, seating arrangements improved, folk epics and fictional stories formed the modern thematic base of the discipline.[3]

The Yakshagana form that we witness today results from a prolonged evolution that drew its essence from ritual theatre, temple and secular arts, and the artists’ imaginations—all interwoven over several hundred years.[3]

Independent Project by Sezal Chug
Guide: Prof. Manohar Khushalani

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