

The Origin of Yakshagana

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Yakshagana is the name for a group of musical dramas popular in southern India a few forms of which are either extinct or at the verge. However, Yakshagana without any qualifier means the more developed Paduvalapaya (the western basis) Yakshagana practiced in western Karnataka state. Therefore this article focuses on Paduvalapaya Yakshagana or simply Yakshagana. The other forms of Yakshagana are Moodalapaya (the eastern basis) or Doddaata and Sannaata in Karnataka, Chindu Yakshagana, Bhagavatha Mela and Kuchupudi Bhagavatamelam in Andhra and Melattur Bhagavatamelam (migrated to) in Tamil Nadu [15].

ORIGIN

Yakshagana is believed to have evolved from pre-classical folk music forms and theatrical arts prevalent in what is now the states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Yakshagana is believed to have evolved into musical drama from the, now extinct, **Ghandharagrama** (before 200 BC to 200 AD) musical system in vogue during Vedic period [9,13]. The reasons cited by K Shivaram Karantha are that both Yakshagana and Ghandharagrama share common features such as using only 5 notes in a Raga, omitting the 5th (Yakshagana drones use only sa and SA and no pa when sung correctly) and the drone tone is Ghandhara or the 3rd [8].

Earliest mentions of Yakshagana happen in **Mallinatha Purana** of Nagachandra (1105) and Chandraprabha Purana (1189) (*"Like the ekkalagaana musicians attracting Lakshmi seated on the lotus"*) as **Yekkalagaana** [9]. In Mallinatha Purana the reference is as follows, *"The king was listening to the ekkalagaana musicians singing Raaga Saliga"*. **Sangeetha Ratnakara** of Sarangadeva (AD 1210) also mentions **Jakka**. The first use of word Yakshagana appears to be in 1430 **Bhimeshvara Purana** by Srinatha. First known inscription to mention Tala-Maddale was in (1556) Kurugod Lakshminarayana Temple, Bellary Dt. Yakshagana in its present form is believed to be influenced by Vaishnava Bhakthi movement from 12th century on. Some think that Yakshagana during 12th century was only a music style. Some literary references have been cited indicating it to be a form of court music which has now evolved into a musical dance drama [13]. Yakshagana is a separate system of music independent of Karnataka Sangeetha and Hindustani music of India and a drama believed to be indigenous to parts of North Western Southern India now surviving only in parts of Karnataka and North Kerala. It is, to some extent, influenced by Karnataka Sangeetha and Hindustani. Yakshagana Talas are believed to be based on the similar folk groves which later evolved into Karnataka Sangeetha Talas. There are some Raagas only present in Yakshagana for e.g. **Hoovu, Koore, Koravi, Mecu** etc and not present in other forms of music [13].

EARLY PRASANGAS AND POETS

Virata Parva by *Vishnu* of Brahmavara is the first available Kannada Yakshagana composed in 1564 (1524?) according to K Shivarama Karantha. Abhinavadasakumara Charitre a Dasavathara Aata by Chaundarasa in 1300s is also claimed to be a Yakshagana prasanga. The Kandukuru Rudra Kavi wrote **Sugreeva Vijayam** in Telugu as early as 1570, an Andhra Yakshagana. This is the first available

Yakshagana in Telugu (Vijayanagara)[]. There are also claims of Pedda Kempa Gaudan's Ganga Gauri Vilasam in Telugu to be the first available Andhra Yakshagana play []. It is unlike that it was in the form that we see today. It is recorded that the popular prime minister of Vijayanagara empire, Mantri Timmarasa (1465-1525 CE?) modified Yakshagana to a Telugu art form which is known called *Burra Katha* in Andhra Pradesh. This hints that Yakshagana was in vogue and probably had some royal support. The Kannada Yakshagana poet Parthi Subba's origin (1800?), whom Ramayana in Yakshagana is attributed to, is not very clear [9]. Shivarama Karantha in his research work argues that it is Subba son of Venkata who is its author, rejecting claims by Muliya Thimmappa and Govinda Pai citing procedural lapses in their findings. Karantha argued in his work 'Yakshagana Bayalata' that Parthi Subba was a Yakshagana poet in the 19th century and the famous Yakshagana poet 'Subba' is actually Nagire Subba - the son of Devamma and Venkatappa.

ANDHRA YAKSHAGANA

Some attribute origin of Yakshagana to Jakkulu tribe in Andhra []. There were several Telugu Yakshagana poets in Vijayanagara Empire (Karnataka) and elsewhere. There are many Yakshagana prasangas in Telugu dating back to 16th century. There are claims of Sistala Ramakrishna Shastri showing that Yakshagana was transported from Andhra to Karnataka and Tamilnadu []. K Shivarama Karantha however did not mention Andhra Yakshagana in his work. There are evidences to show that a form of Yakshagana was performed in Tamil Nadu by Andhras. However, the Yakshagana of Andhra is agreed to be different and less developed compared to Yakshagana in Karnataka while the relationship between them is not clearly established yet [6].

INSTRUMENTS

Another name for Pakavaj is Mardala. Yakshagana Maddale could be a variant of Pakavaj or vice versa. A variant of Pakhavaj called Mardala used in Odissi music is similar to Yakshagana Maddale. History of Mardala of Odissi and Maddale of Yakshagana and their origin needs to be explored. Maddale has less wrable compared to Mrudanga and has equal size drum heads on both the sides which are some of the distinguishing features of Maddale. It is possible that Mrudanga was modified to fit the needs of Yakshagana. Tuning Chande in Yakshagana is comparatively recent practice that started in early 1900s. We may also remember that Pungi of snake charmers was used as drone (shruthi) instead of harmonium we see in use today.

PROSODY

Yakshagana poems are written in celebrated Kannada and Sanskrit metres. Some Yakshagana poems are in *Shara Shatpadi* (Neeladwajana Kalaga and Ratnaavathi Kalyana) and in *Bhoga Shatpadi* in recent ones. *Bhamini* and *Vardhaka Shatpadi*, *Kanda* and *Dwipadi* are other popular meters in Yakshagana. The oldest surviving parasanga books were composed in 15th century. Many compositions have been lost. Shivarama Karantha mentions that he was asked to read a few Prasangas in *valegari* (*leaf books*) which he failed to find. Although possible, there are no clear evidences to show that oral compositions were in use before 15th century. Among older Yakshagana prasangas **Krishna Sandhana** stands out for its simplicity, emotional appeal and natural use of Kannada metres.

INFLUENCE

Kuchupudi of Andhra Pradesh was performed only by men in the beginning, an important signature of Yakshagana. It is well accepted and proven that Siddhendra Yogi the father of Kuchupudi dance system was trained in Udupi Sri Krishna Mutt due to the direction of the then seer Narahari Thirtha for more than 12 years. Then called Siddappa after renouncing family becomes a Yogi. It is proven that what Siddappa learnt was Yakshagana [6,11]. Based on available description and later modification of the Kuchupudi dances by the yogi. Shivarama Karantha argued that what became Kuchupudi by the efforts of the yogi is Yakshagana in its earlier form. The Dasavatara of Goa and Therukoothu of Tamil Nadu is also claimed to be descendents of or influenced by Yakshagana [6].

SUMMARY

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PS: Parts of this article are made available in wikipedia Yakshagana page.

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