YAKṢAGĀNA:

THE DIMENSIONS OF A LIVING SIGN SYSTEM
CHAPTER-VI
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6.0. INTRODUCTION

Yakṣagāna, though a traditional performing art having a history of more than four hundred years, has, during the part few decades, been in a state of flux, with the entire form undergoing a process of change. Some of these changes have been so fundamental as to alter the traditional form itself. These changes have affected almost all aspects of yakṣagāna - the performative context, the themes and the different sign systems like music, dance, costumes, etc.

Fundamental changes have taken place in the organisational structure with the emergence of commercial 'tent' troupes. To begin with, the performative context itself underwent a complete change causing a rupture in the traditional ritualistic performative context. New prasangas that were not based on the epics or purāṇas came to be written and many traditional prasangas were reinterpreted in a radically new light. These and other changes in music, costume and even the reduced ritualistic appeal, etc. may be related to commercialisation.

Modern technological advancement has also influenced yakṣagāna. We have seen how amenities like the sound amplification systems have brought about many changes in music. Similarly when electric lights replaced the oil lamps, several changes necessarily followed. The change in the make-up may be cited as an example of such a change.
Modern means of transportation has enabled troupes to move from place to place easily and perform every night in a different place.\(^1\)

Yakṣaṅgaṅa has continued to be highly popular. We may even say that the popularity has increased over the last few decades. Deraje Seetaramiah says, "The present period can be said to be the great age of yakṣaṅgaṅa. Wherever you see, it is yakṣaṅgaṅa. In training camps, temples, schools and colleges, religious institutions - yakṣaṅgaṅa has a respectable place everywhere".\(^2\) About ten commercial troupes and an equal number of open-air troupes are in existence now. Each troupe performs every night during the season (November to May) and offers about 160 to 180 performances per season. The extraordinary popularity of yakṣaṅgaṅa can be understood in true perspective when we realise that its area of activity is largely confined to the two coastal districts and the adjoining regions of Karnataka. These troupes do not receive any financial aid either from the government or from any other agency and survive only on the support of the public. Yakṣaṅgaṅa has become such a successful commercial venture, that even banks readily advance money now. Yakṣaṅgaṅa is perhaps a unique example where a traditional performing art has become a successful commercial venture. (In this respect, yakṣaṅgaṅa can perhaps be compared to the jātra of Bengal.)

Yakṣaṅgaṅa has even succeeded in facing the challenges of media like cinema and television, which have not in any marked way dented the popularity of yakṣaṅgaṅa. We can understand this achievement of yakṣaṅgaṅa better if we compare it to professional Kannada theatre which has now almost become defunct, being unable to face the challenges of cinema and television, after the days of glory in the first half of this century.\(^3\)
This phenomenal popularity of yakṣaṇa indicates that it continues to be a powerful means of cultural expression even now. This popularity cannot be understood or explained merely in terms of tradition or aesthetic appeal (which no doubt are also present). The form must be reflective of the psychic needs of the viewing public of the present. The community must have found yakṣaṇa meaningful and relevant at the denotative or connotative level, reflecting its desires tensions or paradoxes of the present. Otherwise, yakṣaṇa could not have continued to be popular even now. The present popularity of yakṣaṇa can be studied only in relation to the changes taking place in the form now, because both are interlinked. Thus, these changes become very significant cultural markers which need to be studied, to understand how the traditional cultural form is being reshaped and reinterpreted to make it relevant to the present.

But the traditional performing arts of India, have most often been viewed ahistorically, as representatives of tradition, rather than as meaningful forms of cultural expression having a direct bearing on the every day concerns of the participants. Rajika Puri, commenting on such an approach, says:

In recent years, there has been an increase in the popularity of dance in urban India. ... However we continue to treat dance as an epiphenomenon, as something that exists apart from our social, political, economic and philosophical selves. We have created a chasm between our everyday concerns and those that are expressed in these art forms.

We have enshrined dance in a host of myths, turned it into a symbol of past glory and now attempt to protect it from the 'degeneration' of traditional values that seems to be taking place in urban society in general
... Kathakali is more often than not, presented outside Kerala as one of the "four classical dance styles of India", rather than as a living expression of Malayali culture. Yakṣaṇa is appreciated for its quaintness, as a piece of folk art, or as a primitive version of our legendary Sanskrit theatre rather than in terms of an entre into an understanding of Udupi society.

So far as yakṣaṇa is concerned, the changes taking place now, have not received much scholarly attention. For example, the two books in English on yakṣaṇa (by Shivarama Karanth and by Martha Ashton and Bruce Christie) deal with the open-air performances and have not dealt with the changes taking place in yakṣaṇa now. Shivarama Karanth is highly critical of these changes and considers the commercial troupes as being responsible for all the 'evils' of yakṣaṇa of the present. Look at the following comment: "They [the commercial troupes] pander to low tastes and indulge in vulgar gimmicks. They care little for tradition or art. I shall not waste much time on them, but shall confine my observation to traditional temple troupes, which still hold some hope of future. Yakṣaṇa as a true art form, solely depends on them". Martha Ashton and Bruce Christie writing in 1977, when commercialisation had become well entrenched for more than two decades, do not make a mention of the changes taking place in yakṣaṇa at all. In some Kannada writings, some aspects of the changing face of yakṣaṇa do find a mention but the writings usually take the form of a debate between tradition and change. In this, often acrimonious debate, no synchronic study of all facets of the change, including the change in the performative context, has been made. And the crucial question of why these changes are taking place, has rarely been tackled.
The attempt to 'maintain' tradition in the face of changes taking place in the form, can often result in strange manifestations. Richard Schechner describes Martha Ashton’s attempt at creating an 'authentic' version of yakṣaṇa. He comments, "In Karnataka, South India, ... Martha Ashton was studying yakṣaṇa, a form of dance-drama hardly ever done according to the old ways. Ashton got a company together drawing on several different groups. She hired actors, singers, musicians. She assisted them in recollecting old stories; in recollecting the old steps, music and training. And she filmed the results of their mutual labours. Was she wrong in doing this? ... [This troupe] was the one to tour America. Was it the most or the least Indian?"7 Schechner’s question is self explanatory. Attempts like that of Martha Ashton to 'recreate' the tradition, can only result in a fabricated, fallicious tradition. What is more important, no living form, however traditional in nature, can remain the same for ever. The form does not have an apriorie existence independent of the performative context; It takes shape only in the context of the performance where the performers, the participants and the event - all contribute in shaping the form. When the context of the performance changes, so does the form itself.

Shivarama Karanth’s attitude to the changes taking place in yakṣaṇa may be termed ambivalent. On the one hand, he unequivocally condemns the commercial troupeś for not guarding tradition and on the other he himself has conducted a number of experiments in yakṣaṇa. Many aspects of his experimental productions are far removed from traditional yakṣaṇa, as even fundamental changes were made.8
As a result of such an approach, the culture making processes that are going on in yakṣagāṇa now have almost totally been neglected. To understand this process, where the traditional format of yakṣagāṇa is being recoded and reshaped to yield new meanings, the changes taking place in yakṣagāṇa, will have to be viewed holistically. Such an approach would entail a study of the performance by situating it in the performative context which is governed by the social and economic and even philosophical changes taking place in the society, where the particular cultural form operates. Cultural forms of expression remain comparatively stable, without many changes, when the society where they operate, remains stable. But when the society is undergoing a process of change, the cultural form also cannot remain the same. It is destabilised and either it is redefined to make it relevant to the changing conditions (where it may begin to reflect a meaning for which it was never intended) or it will become a rigid frozen form. Yakṣagāṇa, being vibrant and popular, is anything but frozen. In yakṣagāṇa now, the very conditions under which it is performed and the forces which control it, are all changing. The present phase of yakṣagāṇa can be studied only in the context of these (and other) changes. Then one will have to frame questions such as the following, that Wayne Ashley, in his study of the process of change in Teyyam, the ritualistic performance of Kerala, poses:

How then do we discuss and textually represent a cultural form which has been radically destabilised, is being performed in venues far from its cultural setting, for audiences and patrons with little or no esoteric cultural knowledge? How do we study and conceptualise local culture which is often a response to the religious and social needs of local communities as well as to the competitive cultural policies of nation-state? How do national and international
Questions such as these draw our attention not merely to the destabilised condition of the cultural form but also to the forces (national and international) that try to appropriate the form. But to refuse to acknowledge the changes as Martha Ashton and Bruce Christie do, or to denigrate them totally as is done by Shivarama Karanth and others, would amount to denying the culture making processes of a community. Such an approach smacks of elitism which tries to protect the 'purity' of the tradition against all change. This does not mean that all change is invariably good. Some changes may be detrimental to the form and/or to the community itself. But in order to recognise and understand them, the process of change will have to be first analysed and studied in proper perspective. But to deny or reject all change, is as Ashley says, to "deny the emerging conditions under which culture is being invented or consumed". In addition, the entire Indian society is now undergoing the process of modernisation, changing from a tradition bound, largely agrarian society, to a market economy and a consumer society. The changes in the cultural processes, naturally get accentuated in such a period of change and flux.

This chapter concentrates on the changes taking place in yakṣaṇa now. These changes are studied in relation to the changes taking place in the society resulting in new tensions and power equations. The perspective of performance theory, that is attracting the attention of more and more folklorists, is adopted here. Performance theory views the
cultural text as emerging in the performance itself, where the context plays a crucial role in determining the meaning of the 'text'. In addition, as Bauman has pointed out, performance has a direct bearing on the emergent social structure itself. Before proceeding to study different aspects of the changing scenario of yakṣagāṇa, the socio-political changes taking place in the community and the implications of commercialisation of yakṣagāṇa troupes are discussed. These form the backdrop against which, the changes taking place in the form can be understood.

6.1. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGES

The last several decades have been a period of great social change in the coastal and Malenad regions (as it has been in most other parts of India). Factors like democracy and modernisation have been largely responsible for this change. These changes have been discussed in Chapter II. They may briefly be summarised here. After India attained independence in 1947, the democratic system of government that was accepted, brought many fundamental changes. The society till then was largely feudal with a hierarchical structure: the power was concentrated in the hands of the feudal lords and the land owners. With democracy, the groups that were classified as backward castes began to attain importance because of their numerical superiority. Slowly they began to assert themselves. With the implementation of the land reforms act many of them became owners of land and freed themselves from the economic power exercised by the land-lords. (The prestige that has traditionally been associated with land ownership was also theirs now.) New means of livelihood, like the rolling of bīqīs, (tobacco rolled in dry leaves - used for smoking) contributed to their
economic independence. There also started the trend of movement to places like Bombay in search of a better future. (Many of those who went out, have become successful businessmen, specially in the hotel industry.) Modern education has also made these groups more aware of their rights.

This newly achieved economic freedom and political power has resulted in a new social upsurge where the old feudal hierarchical order is increasingly coming under challenge and creating new social tensions and clash of ideologies. Many of the systems and values that were accepted for long, are being questioned now. Power is now shifting from the dominant castes to those sections of the society that were classified as backward and politics is increasingly being used as a way of attaining power. In addition, each group is now trying to assert its ethnic and cultural identity. Traditional rituals and customs of different caste groups are now celebrated with renewed vigour, where they are made to serve the new cause of establishing their ethnic identity and asserting the position of the group in the community at large.

Moreover, we also have the problems confronted by a traditional society that is in the process of modernisation. The challenges posed by the conversion from an agrarian economy to that of a free market consumer economy are also there.

6.2. COMMERCIALISATION OF YAKŞAGĀNA

Of all the changes that have taken place in yakşagāna, perhaps the one change that had far reaching implications,
was the emergence of troupes that were organised on a commercial basis. The details of the two types of organisations of yakṣagāṇa troupes have been discussed in Chapter III. The commercial troupes (commonly referred to as tent troupes) have been in existence in the last three four decades. The commercial troupes have become well established now and they have become so successful that the traditional open-air troupes (which are also in existence), are often treated as poor cousins. This fundamental change in the format of the troupes, has affected almost all aspects of yakṣagāṇa.

With commercialisation, the performative context was totally changed. It was no more the patronage of one individual (or a group of individuals) that afforded the opportunity for the entire village to witness the performance. In tent troupes, any one who paid the money and bought a ticket, became the patron. Thus, from the patronage of one person, there came about a radical shift, where all the spectators, from the erstwhile landlords to the landless labourers, became patrons. With this shift, one of the main significances of yakṣagāṇa, that we have analysed in the previous chapter, of asserting the position and authority of the patron, ceased to operate. The seating arrangement in tent troupes, also reflected the change with the divisions based on different rates of admission and not on one's caste or class.

We have observed in the previous chapter how in the open-air performances, the patron had the right to choose the prasanga to be performed. This right has now passed on to the paying public. This fundamental change in the composition of those who 'control' the conditions of performance was not
felt to be a break from tradition to begin with. But slowly and imperceptibly, the troupes began to feel the need to cater to and satisfy the desires of the paying public. Thus effectively, the control of the performance passed from the hands of the landlords and the rich to the nebulous desire of the large majority. An understanding of this change in the performative context, is of paramount importance in studying and analysing the process of change in yakṣagāṇa. There also occurred a break in the ritualistic mould of the performance. From being a ritual in the service of a deity, the performance now became a commercial enterprise.

Due to commercialisation, many other changes also inevitably followed. Performances were not confined to specific occasions or particular days. The troupes perform every night during the season. There has also been a shift from villages to the towns. The bigger villages and towns are now becoming important centres of yakṣagāṇa.¹⁷ In the desire to attract customers, troupes began to include new prasangas in their repertory. In the beginning, these new prasangas were based on themes drawn from the epics and puranas. But in due course, prasangas based on folk heroes and local deities were also written and these became highly popular. Many prasangas that were not based either on classical sources or on folk traditions also came into vogue.

Other important changes (not connected with commercialisation) have also taken place in the last several decades. Due to the pioneering efforts of Shivarama Karanth, yakṣagāṇa came to be recognised as one of the important genres of performing arts of India. Yakṣagāṇa began to gain national and even international recognition. Yakṣagāṇa, which in the past was often looked down upon, has now gained
in prestige. Even highly educated persons, perform in yakṣa-gāna. State and national academies honour yakṣa-gāna artistes. Many scholars have begun to take an active interest in yakṣa-gāna as performers and as critics. A good number of books are being published on yakṣa-gāna. About half a dozen doctoral dissertations on different aspects of yakṣa-gāna have been written. The system of training of yakṣa-gāna artistes is also undergoing a change. Till recently, yakṣa-gāna had no institutionalised system of training. But now, new institutions, specifically for training of yakṣa-gāna artistes have been established.

Any study of the present phase of yakṣa-gāna can be made only in the background of all the issues that have been raised here. Questions with regard to tradition - change, open air troupes - tent troupes, traditional prasangas - new prasangas etc. cannot be discussed in isolation. These questions can be studied in their proper perspective only when we situate them in the larger context of the issues discussed earlier.

Yakṣa-gāna, as is evidenced by its great popularity, continues to be a potent form of cultural expression. The changes taking place now, have made it a vehicle for the expression of meanings and voices for which it was never meant originally. Thus, the present phase of yakṣa-gāna is a fine example of what folklorists and anthropologists have termed 'cultural invention'.¹⁸ This term refers to the process in which cultural forms are recoded and restructured, whereby they become expressive vehicles for new meanings and ideologies. Wayne Ashley (following Hobsbaum and Ranger), uses the term 'invented traditions', which he explains as follows:
... traditions are invented more frequently and are more likely to occur when a transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which the old traditions had been designed, producing new social patterns to which they were not applicable. They are also invented when the old traditions, their institutions and patrons no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible ... In short, they occur when there is a crisis in authority, when the legitimacy of powerful organisations, classes or political regimes comes under question, or competing groups seek to establish themselves in opposition to dominant forces.

The present phase of yakṣagāṇa may be said to be a fine example of 'invented tradition'. In it we see how a transformation of the society is leading to a redefining and restructuring of the traditional form of yakṣagāṇa. In the study that follows, two aspects have been taken up for close analysis: (i) the reinterpretation of traditional prasangās, and (ii) Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa. Other aspects of the change are dealt with and summed up in the last section. Changes taking place in individual details like music or the improvised text, have already been dealt with in the previous chapter. Here, the changes are viewed in their totality, keeping the changes in the themes as the central point of focus.

Through a study of these changes, an attempt has been made to show how yakṣagāṇa is being redefined and recoded to reflect the emerging social and political ideologies. This should not be taken to mean that yakṣagāṇa has suddenly ceased to have the meaning(s) that it has signified all these centuries. The contending meanings and ideologies can be said to be in a dialectical process. In being a traditional form and in being an 'invented tradition', yakṣagāṇa reflects both meanings and also shows how contending groups contest to control the cultural form and the meaning(s) that it generates.
6.3. REINTERPRETATION OF PRASANGAS: PROCESS OF SECULARISATION

One of the most obvious developments of yakṣagāṇa in the last few decades has been a movement away from ritual towards entertainment. This process of deritualisation has been reducing the religious appeal, and a change in the context, theme and message, is termed secularisation in this dissertation. The term ‘secular’ has become highly loaded and contentious in the present Indian context, specially the highly politicised overtones that have come to be ascribed to the term now. But the term has been used here, in the sense of the movement of yakṣagāṇa away from rituals and ostensible religious message and content towards a more ‘secular’ discourse.

Traditionally, the themes of yakṣagāṇa have always been taken from the epics and the puranas. These prasangas highlight the fight between Dharma and Adharma with victory of Dharma in the end. The wicked characters like Rāvana and Kaurava are punished and dharma upheld. The prasangas usually highlight the message that faith in God alone will enable individuals to overcome all the difficulties of life and achieve true fulfilment. The entire performance and the incidents depicted therein were considered to be a celebration of God’s līla (divine play).

But, as we have observed in the previous chapter, one of the most fundamental changes taking place in yakṣagāṇa now is the reduced ritualistic appeal. Aspects like commercialisation have accentuated this process. This change gets expressed in characters like Kaurava, Kaṃśa, Rāvana, etc are depicted now. Characters such as these are recognised as pratināyakas (anti-heroes). In traditional performances,
they were represented as wicked, evil characters, who were punished in the end by the forces of good. The traditional make-up and costume of these characters also highlighted their wickedness.

But now, through a process of reinterpretation, these 'wicked' characters are presented in a totally different perspective. This reinterpretation is taking place in the case of traditional prasangas in which these characters appear. The same written text (or to be more precise, an edited version of the same text) is used now, but through the process of reinterpretation, a radically altered version of the performance text is created. In this process, the emphasis is being laid on 'humanising' these wicked characters. They are not presented as evil characters who have broken the moral order and thus pitted themselves against God and Dharma. Instead, the performance text projects these characters as having many worthy qualities, but due to one weakness in them (tragic flaw?), they are shown as having chosen the path that they have taken. The performance text highlights their worthy qualities and even provides justification for their wicked deeds. As a result of such a change, these wicked characters become the protagonists. These characters are developed in such a way that the sympathy of the audience also lies with them. As a result, instead of highlighting the religious message which is the main theme of the written text, the emphasis in the performance text, falls on the 'tragic' predicament of the protagonists.

This process of transformation can be seen in the depiction of villainous characters like Kaurava, Karna, Duṣṭabuddhi, Sālva, Kīcaka etc. Even demonic or semi demonic
characters like Kamsa, Jaråsandha and Råvana are being 'humanised' now and their characters glorified. No doubt, some of these characters like Karna or Kaurava have the ingredients that can be termed tragic and by a subtle shift of emphasis, they can be projected in a tragic light. There is a precedence also for such a representation in Kannada literature. The great poets of old Kannada, Pampa (10th century A.D.) and Ranna (10th Century A.D.) have glorified Karna and Kaurava as noble characters deserving the sympathy of the readers. In presenting such a perspective, they differ markedly from the original Sanskrit epics. But the texts of yakṣagāna prasangas are not based on the works of Pampa and Ranna, the Jain Poets, but largely on the works of Kumaravyasa and on Torave Ramayana. These works highlight the glory of Viṣṇu and his incarnations. The yakṣagāna prasangas also highlight the same religious message. But in the performances now, using the same written text, a radically altered performance text is created.

In order to understand this process better, we can take a few examples and see how the reinterpretation is done and what its implications are. To begin with, we can take the example of the way Kamsa’s story is depicted in yakṣagāna now. There are several prasangas in yakşagāna dealing with the childhood of Kṛṣṇa and the killing of Kamsa. Two of them are Kṛṣṇa Bālalīle (The Divine play [about] the childhood of Kṛṣṇa) and Kṛṣṇa Janma Bāla Līle (The Divine play [about] the birth and childhood of Kṛṣṇa). As is clear from the titles themselves, the main theme of these prasangas is about the birth and childhood of Kṛṣṇa. The killing of Kamsa formed only a part of the discourse and came as the climax that upheld the divinity of Kṛṣṇa. But in the performances now, only the final moments of Kamsa’s life are depicted. Thus,
the performance centres round Kaṁsa and his final moments. Instead of Kṛṣṇa, Kaṁsa becomes the protagonist and this, drastically alters the discourse. Earlier, the performance texts faithfully stuck to the prasanga, highlighting the divinity of Kṛṣṇa and the miraculous deeds done by him in his childhood and boyhood culminating with the killing of Kaṁsa. But now, with the shift of emphasis, Kaṁsa and his fear of death, his consciousness of the impending end, his efforts to overcome them and his ultimate failure, become the crux of the discourse. Kṛṣṇa instead of being the protagonist, now becomes only an agent who causes the death of Kaṁsa. Because of such a change, the message of the performance text gets drastically altered. Instead of witnessing the divinity of Kṛṣṇa and the way he punishes the wicked Kaṁsa and upholds Dharma, the audience now witnesses the tragic fate of a man who fights against the inexorable forces that have decided on his death. To highlight such a message, usually only the last part of the prasanga is enacted.22

The same shift of emphasis from the good characters to the wicked characters can be recognised in the depiction of Jarāsandha also.23 The original prasanga is entitled Agrapūje (worship of the senior most:=honour paid to the most respected person in the assembly during the ritual of yagna). Later, it came to be performed under names like Rajāsūya (the name of the yagna), Māgadha Vadhe (the Killing of Māgadha-Jarāsandha) and now just Jarāsandha. The changing nomenclatures themselves point to the changing perspectives in which the prasanga was and is being performed.

We can also take the example of the way in which the story of Candrahāsa is played now. Candrahāsa, the main character of the prasanga, is a great devotee of Viṣṇu.
Duṣṭabuddhi, the minister, is the arch villain. He tries his best to get Candrahāsa killed, so that his son can become the king. But all his evil designs come to naught as his own son gets killed in the plot woven by him. The following comments by G.S.Bhat throw light on what the prasanga really highlights and the changed perspective in which it is presented now:

The prasanga is surfeit with the religious message of the greatness of Hari [Viṣṇu]... The main theme of the prasanga is that the grace of Hari alone is responsible for saving Candrahāsa from all difficulties and for his success... There was a time when the same was depicted in performance also... [In the performances now], the clash of human values became the main theme. That mankind should follow the path of love and faith rather than that of cunning, cruelty and hatred, became the message of the performance. The defeat of Duṣṭabuddhi who resorted to inhuman means to fulfil his selfish ends and the victory of Candrahāsa, who believed in human goodness, became the theme of performance. From the limited vision of "Believe in Hari, all will be well" to the larger vision of "Belief in human goodness is the way to happiness", became the message of the performance text.

The above comments show how the discourse of the performance text now centres on the clash of different human values and not on the ostensible religious message of the written text. This kind of a drastically altered interpretation which conveys almost the opposite message, even while working within the parameters of the written text, becomes possible in yakṣaṇa because of three reasons.

1. Each prasanga deals with an isolated individual event
2. Editing of the written text.
3. Freedom provided by the improvised text
6.3.1. **An isolated episode from the epic world**

Each yakṣagāna *prasanga* deals with one particular event drawn from the larger canvas of the epic world. As such, many a time, only one small incident of a character's life is represented. To take an example, Gadāyuddha deals with the events on the last day of the Kurukṣetra war in which only the final moments of Duryōdhana's life are represented. As the *prasanga* does not deal with his life as a whole, all the evil deeds committed by him in the past, are not depicted. Only his final moments and his death are depicted. So it becomes easier for the artistes to glorify his character. (References to his past life may be made in improvised dialogue by other characters, but these appear only as passing references and never form part of the main thrust of the discourse). Because of such a structure of the written text, the task of reinterpretation of the wicked characters and the acceptance of such a rendering by the audience becomes easier.

6.3.2. **The editing of the written script**

In the present day performances the traditional text is used but it is edited in such a way as to highlight the 'anti-heroes'. In yakṣagāna the written text is never considered sacrosanct and a certain amount of editing has always been in practice. Even in the most conventional performances all the songs of the written text are never used. The written text may contain 250 to 300 songs but only about 150 songs (or even less) are used in any performance. Thus editing of the written text has been an accepted tradition in yakṣagāna. Using this freedom the *prasangas* are edited now a days so that they centre round and highlight the wicked characters.
We can again take the example of Gadāyuddha. The theme of the written text is summarised in the following words by G.S.Bhat. "The prasanga, Gadāparva deals with the incidents of the eighteenth day of the Mahābhārata war... The text reflects the attitudes of Vyāsa and Kumaravyāsa. Kṛṣṇa, as the protector of Dharma, is the focal point of the written text".26 In it, Kaurava is depicted as a villainous wicked person. The written script contains five episodes. After the traditional oḍḍōlaga, the first episode deals with the fight between Dharmarāya and Śalya in which Śalya is killed. The next scene presents the desolate Kaurava who decides to hide in lake. Before doing so, he meets Aśvathāma who promises to kill the Pāṇḍavas. The third episode is the fight between Bhima and Kaurava in which Kaurava is killed. The fourth episode deals with Aśvathāma and his Brahmadāstra (lit. Brahma’s weapon;= recognised as the most powerful and devastating weapon against which there is no defence) that he uses. Kṛṣṇa saves the Pāṇḍavas by changing the direction of the Brahmadāstra, but the children of the Pāṇḍavas are killed. Aśvathāma is publicly disgraced for killing the children and is stripped of all his powers. The last episode is about Dharmarāya’s coronation under the supervision of Kṛṣṇa.

In the performances now, only those events that deal with Kaurava and Aśvathāma are chosen to be enacted. The first and last episodes are deleted. So, the performance text highlights the desolate plight of Kaurava who has now lost everything but not the determination to fight on, though he is certain of his fate now. Infact, in recent performances, even the Aśvathāma episode is deleted. The scenes that are deleted are the scenes that highlight Kṛṣṇa’s greatness as the protector of the Pāṇḍavas and of Dharma. So, the performance text focusses entirely on Kaurava who
thus replaces Kṛṣṇa as the protagonist. This results in a radical shift in the discourse from the glorification of Kṛṣṇa as the protector of Dharma to the tragic plight and end of Kaurava. The performance text thus totally subverts the ideology of the written text even while using the same (or parts of the same) written text.

6.3.3. Freedom provided by improvised text

The freedom that is afforded by the improvised text is also used for highlighting the wicked characters and presenting them in a new light. Instead of the opposition between Dharma and Adharma a new opposition is posited. Kaurava, in the performance of the prasanga referred to above, is presented almost as an existentialist hero who believes that man can shape his own destiny. The Pāṇḍavas are projected as believers in God's grace, being guided at every step by Kṛṣṇa. So, the opposition of Dharma and Adharma gets totally altered leading to the new opposition of Man versus the supernatural forces. As a result of such a fundamental change in the discourse of the performance text, the emphasis on the religious message that we find in the written text gets totally subverted.

A similar shift can be observed in the depiction of other wicked characters. Kīcaka was earlier depicted as an arrogant, drunken lout and a womaniser who used his power to possess any woman that attracted him. The written text also describes Kīcaka with epithets like rogue, scoundrel etc. But in present day performances he is presented as a dignified respectful person who gets attracted by women only twice in his life: once by Draupadi during her Swayamvara (the election of a husband by a virgin girl) and a second
time by Sairandhri (without realising that Sairandhri is Draupadi in disguise). The Kicaka we now see, is a lovelorn hero who meets his end in the hands of Bhīma. The freedom of speech is used to create this radically altered picture of Kīcaka (for which there is no justification in the written text).

In the *Mahabharata* Karṇa is depicted as one of the four wicked characters (the others being Duryōdhana, Duṣyāsana and Śakuni). But Karna’s story has all the ingredients whereby he can be depicted easily in a tragic light. Karṇa’s character was perhaps one of the earliest to undergo the process of secularisation in yakṣagāna. Earlier Karṇa Parva was played with emphasis on the scenes of war highlighting the eponymous hero’s courage and to a certain extent, his unfliching loyalty to Kaurava. But now a days the performance of the same written text highlights Karṇa’s intense feeling of being an orphan, the insults suffered by him because of his ‘low’ caste, and in the final moments (after he comes to know the secret of his birth), the conflicting pulls in his mind between Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. Prabhakara Joshi describes how Karna’s depiction now differs radically from the picture of Karṇa that we get in the written text. "The tragic picture of Karṇa that the artiste creates, the oscillation in his mind between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas [that the artiste pictures], do not have a basis in the written text except one or two songs at the end. The prasanga is a straight forward narration and Karṇa is pictured as a courageous, haughty personality".27

The improvised dialogues are thus used to create a radically altered interpretation of these characters and also to posit new oppositions. They are also used to make the
audience sympathise with these characters. We can again take an example from Gadāyuddha. Kaurava comes alone to the deserted battle field in the night and sees the heap of dead bodies. He recognises the bodies of his dear ones like Karṇa and Duṣyāsana and mourns for their death. He then recognises the body of Abhimanyu (Arjuna’s son, who was killed in the battle by the Kauravas). He expresses his grief that so bold a person, who could have carried on the great name of Kuru family, was also killed in this battle. When Kaurava expresses his sorrow over the death of an opponent in this manner, his character suddenly gets ‘elevated’. Forgetting his past misdeeds, the audience now begin to sympathise with him. By subtle touches such as these, the entire attitude of the spectators towards the character is changed. Instead of perceiving him as a wicked character who gets just deserts for his misdeeds, he is viewed as a person ‘more sinned against than sinning’. This changed perspective of the audience becomes a part of the process of secularisation.

6.3.4. Subversion of the religious message

As a result of all these changes, a radically altered performance text is created. In this performance text the opposition of Dharma and Adharma that is the crux of the written text, gets totally altered. Instead, a new opposition of Man versus Fate gets projected and these wicked characters are presented in a tragic light. Because of this shift of emphasis these characters become the protagonists. The religious message of the written text thus gets totally subverted. The discourse of the performance text becomes not merely ‘deritualised’ but projects a perspective that may be termed ‘anti-religious’. The performers and spectators do not seem to be completely aware of all the implications of
this change. This subversive discourse of the performance text is quite often accepted as the continuation of traditional yakṣagāna. But some of the traditional spectators express a sense of uneasiness at these changes. All the same, such reinterpretations are accepted and appreciated by a large majority of viewers as evidenced by the popularity of these performances.

This process of secularisation whereby the prominence of the religious message is decreased (and sometimes subverted) can be related to several factors. The first of course is the process of commercialisation whereby the religious context of the performance was completely changed. This provided the base in which such reinterpretations could be attempted by the performers and accepted by the viewers. Another factor was the influence of modern education. This process of reinterpretation of the wicked characters started first in tālamaddale. During the last thirty, forty years, many educated persons entered the field of tālamaddale. In their interpretation of the wicked characters a clear influence of the model of western tragedy (specially Greek and Shakespearean), was visible. Whether consciously or not, they tried to present the anti heroic characters in a tragic light. Such interpretations became quite popular and any one who plays these characters now, follows and develops on this model.

The other important reason is that the religious message of the written text does not carry the same significance or appeal to the audience of the present. The changing awareness of the audience is in part due to modern education and in part due to the changing socio political situation. The attitude in which this discourse about gods
and goddesses is received now has also undergone a change. As pointed out by G.H. Nayak, if in the past, the audience viewed the gods appearing on the stage as true entities who had the supreme power of controlling the lives of all human beings, now, they are mostly viewed as part of an aesthetic process. The mental state of the spectators now may be termed, what Coleridge calls, 'the willing suspension of disbelief'.

Because of the increasing social awareness among all classes of people, Brahminism is coming increasingly under challenge and there is no unquestioned acceptance of the tenets of Brahminism any more. The gods presented in yakṣagāna are worshipped by almost all Hindus. Yet these gods are associated with classical Sanskritic (and so Brahminical) culture. One wonders if such a radical reinterpretation of traditional prasangas has been made possible by the changing perception of social hierarchy and Brahminism.

6.4. TULU YAKṢAGĀNA: POLITICS AND IDENTITY

Among the several changes taking place in yakṣagāna now perhaps the most contentious one, is the emergence of Tulu yakṣagāna. As we have seen in the previous chapter, until recently, even in Tulu speaking areas, yakṣagāna was played in Kannada. But in the last few decades Tulu began to be used instead of Kannada in yakṣagāna. This is a development of the last twenty-two fifty five years and it has taken tenku-titțu (southern region) yakṣagāna by storm. Tulu yakṣagāna is played only in tenku-titțu and it has not affected baďagutițțu (northern region) yakṣagāna. This is perhaps because the area of tenkutițțu roughly coincides with the
Tuṣu speaking areas (except for Udipi taluk which is a Tuṣu speaking area but its yakṣaṇa belongs to baḍagutitṭu). In the past twenty odd years Tuṣu yakṣaṇa has become so popular that in tenkutiṭṭu almost all the professional troupes perform only Tuṣu prasangas. In fact, the managers of professional troupes say that they cannot survive commercially unless they perform Tuṣu prasangas. Tuṣu prasangas have come to dominate Tenkutiṭṭu yakṣaṇa to such an extent that it is often difficult to come across a Kannada yakṣaṇa performance now. This development of Tuṣu yakṣaṇa has become a highly controversial topic among yakṣaṇa lovers and critics. Very strong opinions both for and against Tuṣu yakṣaṇa have been expressed. The reasons for this are not merely linguistic. Tuṣu yakṣaṇa has brought with it many other changes. Aspects of traditional yakṣaṇa like the costume structure, the themes, have all changed. This has resulted in the cry that Tuṣu yakṣaṇa is leading to the death of the centuries old form of yakṣaṇa. At the same time, it is also true that Tuṣu yakṣaṇa has now become extremely popular and most tenkutiṭṭu professional troupes now perform Tuṣu yakṣaṇa.

The sudden emergence of this drastically altered form within the traditional mould of yakṣaṇa and its acceptance by the community (as evidenced by its popularity and commercial success) cannot be understood in true perspective by treating it only as a question of a language shift (from Kannada to Tuṣu). To understand this phenomenon properly, we have to situate this change in the larger context of the socio political changes taking place in the society leading to conflicting ideologies. Only such a holistic view would enable us to understand this phenomenon properly. Tuṣu yakṣaṇa is a fine example of ‘invented tradition’, where
emergent social tensions and new power equations of the society are reflected in this new format of the traditional art. So far, the emergence of Tulu yakṣaṅāna has never been studied in this light. The question has either been looked at, as a linguistic problem (Tulu instead of Kannada) or as a commercial gimmick, in pandering to the low taste of the audience. Before we proceed to study how Tulu yakṣaṅāna has become an expressive means for the newly emerging social equations, it is necessary to know what Tulu yakṣaṅāna actually is and how it differs from traditional yakṣaṅāna.

Tulu is one of the Dravidian languages spoken in most parts of Dakshina Kannada district. This is the language of most of the people of the region though many are bilingual, in the sense that they also know Kannada. But among the rural illiterates there are many who do not even understand Kannada. Tulu has rich oral literature but it has very little written literature. The relationship between Kannada and Tulu has already been referred in Chapters II and V. They may again be summed up here. Historically, this coastal belt has almost always been under the suzerainty of the kingdoms of the mainland (Deccan plateau) like the Hoysalas, the Vijayanagar kings, the Keladi rulers, the Mysore kings, etc. until the 19th century when it came under direct British rule. As a result of this political domination, Kannada became the language of administration, education and 'high' culture. So Tulu, though spoken by the majority of the people, did not enjoy the prestige that was accorded to Kannada. As Amrut Someshwara says, "The fact that Tulu region was under the continued dominance of Kannada rulers and that the Kannada language alone was used for all practical purposes, meant an inferior status for Tulu".33
It is only recently that Tulu language and Tulu culture are being studied seriously. Among Tulu speakers, a new awareness regarding their linguistic and cultural identity can be recognised. So far as Tulu yakṣagāna is concerned, the first Tulu prasanga was written way back in 1887. It was written by Sankayya Bhagavata on the request of the ruler of Vitla whose mother tongue was Tulu. The next attempt was the translation of Kannada prasanga Kṛṣṇa Sandhāna into Tulu in the year 1929. But performances in Tulu, remained only a curiosity and such attempts were few and far between until the 1960's when Tulu yakṣagāna began to be performed regularly.

The Tulu yakṣagāna of today has broken away from traditional yakṣagāna in very significant ways. This shift is not merely a question of language. Along with the language, many other aspects also have undergone a change. (This is perhaps a fine example for the structuralist viewpoint that our cognition of the world is dependent on the language we have at our disposal. When the language changes, the cognition also changes.) To begin with, an important change was in the selection of themes. Tulu prasangas to begin with, took as their themes, the stories regarding the local deities and folk heroes of Tulu land. Prasangas were based on Tulu oral literature and the stories of folk heroes like Koṭi Cennaya or deities like Kalkuḍa were depicted. This was a break from the tradition of yakṣagāna where the themes were always drawn from classical sources. With this shift, there came about a change in the costume structure also because the traditional costumes were designed to signify and represent the characters - the gods, demons and the superhuman figures - of the epic world. As a result, the traditional costumes were rejected in Tulu yakṣagāna. (The
new costumes that are used in Tulu yakṣaṅāna now, do not seem to have emerged into a coherent typology. They appear like a hasty imitation of the costumes of cinema and professional Kannada theatre.\(^{35}\)

The early Tulu yakṣaṅāna dealt with the folk heroes of the Tulu land, but soon, these themes were exhausted. Due to commercial compulsions, the troupes are under pressure to present at least one new prasanga every year, as part of their repertory. So the Tulu prasangas of the present day, do not have any such grounding either in classical sources or in folk literature. They are now the product of the writer’s fertile brain, dealing with some imaginary local chieftain of the Tulu land. (Such new prasangas dealing with purely imaginary plots have become the norm in Kannada yakṣaṅāna also. They have been dealt with in the next section.)

In the Tulu prasangas, the hāsyagāra (clown) has assumed great importance. In most traditional prasangas, the role of the hāsyagāra, is mostly peripheral (at least in the written script). But they play a pivotal role in many Tulu prasangas. Artistes like Mijar Annappa are said to be great masters in exploiting the potentiality of the Tulu language. One wonders if the lack of strong characterisation in the new prasangas has resulted in the greater prominence given to the hāsyagāra. The most prominent function of the hāsyagāra at the discoursal level in traditional performances, is the role of mediation between the epic world of signification and the every day world of the spectators. As no such mediation is necessary in Tulu prasangas (the characters being nearer to life), the hāsyagāra has perhaps moved from the periphery to the centre stage.
Tulu yakṣagāna has also got rid of the traditional ritualistic features like oḍḍolaga and mangala. Other aspects of yakṣagāna, like the music, the performance structure and context, the organisational pattern are all maintained. The traditional dance is also maintained, though in a curtailed form. The value system and world view projected in these performances, are almost the same as that of traditional yakṣagāna - the victory of good over evil, the assertion of the traditional hierarchical structure of society, the place of women, etc. All these project the status quoist position with a strong assertion of the traditional values.

These changes brought about by Tulu yakṣagāna have shaken the very roots of traditional yakṣagāna. In tenkutitiţtu, these changes have had their impact on Kannada yakṣagāna also. As a result, many yakṣagāna scholars are expressing great concern about this change and are opposing Tulu yakṣagāna most vehemently. Prabhakara Joshi, for example, says, "The alround beauty of yakṣagāna is itself in danger". He further adds, "The question is, if Tulu yakṣagāna is responsible for the destruction of the costume structure of tenkutitiţtu? The answer is yes. The history of the last thirty years of yakṣagāna is witness to this. The increase in Tulu yakṣagāna performances and the neglect of the tradition in costumes are both integrally and inevitably linked. This fact cannot be denied. It is not a mere coincidence. The artistes as well as the managers of troupes seem to have made it a rule that Tulu yakṣagāna cannot have the traditional costume structure". Others seem to think of Tulu yakṣagāna only in terms of the linguistic shift and are of the opinion that Tulu yakṣagāna must have adopted a process of slow change. U.P. Upadhyaya for example says, "If
Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa had continued the classical tradition of yakṣagāṇa for one or two decades with the stories from purāṇas and only the language being Tuḷu, this confusion would not have been there. These problems were created when every thing was changed at once".  

The opinions quoted above, are some of the typical reactions against Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa. These writers seem to think that the entire problem of the emergence of Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa and what it signifies, is related only to language. Even the staunch supporters of Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa are prone to the same conceptual error when they brand the critics of Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa as the ‘opponents of Tuḷu’.

The question of Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa cannot be understood if viewed from the limited perspective of Kannada-Tulu dichotomy. A new form of cultural expression does not emerge and become extremely popular, unless there is a strong cultural, social and even political urge for such an expressive form. (The critics of Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa attribute its emergence solely to the commercial urge of the troupes, which is no doubt one of the factors behind Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa. But this does not explain why the same traditional spectators of yakṣagāṇa, now wish to witness Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa). Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa is a fine example of what anthropologists call ‘invented tradition’. This refers to the process, where a traditional cultural form is restructured and recoded whereby it begins to convey meanings for which it was never originally intended. It is also an example of the clash of competing ideologies, where, in the words of Wayne Ashley, "differently positioned groups with competing political and social goals construct, remember and dismantle the past or images of the past in order to shape both the present and the future".  

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In Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa, the social tensions and the contending power equations of different social groups find expression in the discourse of the performance at a deeply subliminal level. In order to comprehend the complete significance, we have to look not merely at what Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa chooses to represent, but also at what it chooses not to represent. This negative signification becomes very important in comprehending the true meaning of Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa.

Reference has already been made to the changing social situation, the newly emerging social tensions and power play. A few words about the particular social situation of the Tuḷu speaking society are necessary here. Till recently, ownership of land as well as political power was mostly in the hands of the Brahmins, the Bunts or the Jains. But now, the other castes and communities that are classified as backward, are contending with these communities for power and position. Specially, the Billava and the Mogavira communities are now becoming politically and socially powerful. The unquestioned hegemony of the upper castes is increasingly being challenged, leading to new social equations and tensions. Economically also, these communities are becoming independent. With political and economic independence, there naturally grew an assertion of their ethnic identity as well. The recently renovated temple built by Sri Narayana Guru, a saint who in the early part of this century had worked for the upliftment of the backward classes in Kerala and in Dakshina Kannada, has now become a centre for the Billava community. This stress on ethnic identity, as well as the struggle for political and economic power, has naturally resulted in new social tensions.
Along with this, an anti Brahminical trend is also emerging, specially among the educated sections. The Brahmins are now seen not merely as exploiters, but are also seen as being responsible for most of the ills of the Hindu society. Brahminism as a concept is also coming under increasing challenge, though its hold over the community at large, is still pretty strong.

Coming to the question of language, we have already seen in the last chapter, how in Tulu speaking areas, the hegemony of Kannada over Tulu was marked and how traditional yakṣagāṇa (performed in Kannada) became part of that hegemony. The assertion of the ‘great tradition’ in yakṣagāṇa, in representing the stories about the pan Indian pantheon, even when most of the participants were followers of the ‘little tradition’, has also been commented upon in the previous chapter. Amruta Someshwara explains the importance of the local traditions of ritual and worship to the Tulu people. He says, "However, so far as folk religions of Tulu Nadu are concerned, the conventional religions ... are of no relevance. Folk deities like Bhuta (spirit) and Nagaradhane (snake worship) have dominated the life of the common folk for centuries". In spite of such a prominence, we have already seen how, until recently, these deities were never represented in yakṣagāṇa.

In the light of all these contending and conflicting forces in the political, social and religious spheres, we have to study the emergence of Tulu yakṣagāṇa. It was not a simple question of replacing one language with another. Tulu yakṣagāṇa became the vehicle of expression of the assertion of linguistic, ethnic and religious (non Brahminical) identity. The form of yakṣagāṇa (which was felt as their
own) was retained, but the discourse of traditional yakṣaṅgaṇa was rejected. The new Tuḷu prasangas (at least in the beginning), were about the folk deities and heroes of Tuḷu culture. Prasangas like KotiGennaya (about the brothers Koti and Cennaya, their bravery and their tragic end), Amara Śilpi Kalkuḍa (The Immortal sculptor Kalkuḍa - worshipped as a Bhūta) and Tulunada Siri (The Story of Siri, and her sister, belonging to the Bunt community), bear witness to this.

In order to fully comprehend the significance of this change, we should look not merely at what Tuḷu yakṣaṅgaṇa represents but also at what it has chosen not to represent. This negation is equally significant. The traditional prasangas of yakṣaṅgaṇa, based on the epics and purāṇas have almost totally been rejected. This can be seen as a rejection of the classical Brahminical tradition. As a corollary to this, the costumes and make-up structure that represented these epic characters, has also been rejected. That the new costume structure has not, as yet, evolved a significant structure or typology, does not seem to matter much. What is rejected appears more significant than what is actually represented.

Thus Tuḷu yakṣaṅgaṇa represents a rejection of the language (Kannada) as well as the thematic, cultural framework of the epics and the purāṇas which they represent. The same performing art, yakṣaṅgaṇa now in Tuḷu, performs a totally different function - not the reassertion of classical/Brahminical tradition (with which the epics and purāṇas have come to be associated) but the subaltern defiance as represented by the rejection of the language as well as the classical discourse.
This does not mean that Tulu yakṣagāna was a very conscious effort at representing the forces and tensions that have been analysed so far. It is not even definite if the artistes, writers and the viewers are aware of all its implications. As with all cultural forms of expression, yakṣagāna is also a highly symbolic system and so the meanings are often so deeply embedded that it is not easy to recognise or decipher them. Tulu yakṣagāna, for example, at the manifest level of the discourse, upholds the value system of traditional yakṣagāna, including the rigid hierarchical structure of the society. But to take these messages, as the true or only meaning of Tulu yakṣagāna, would be to miss the real significance totally. Because, at the immanent level, it has become an expressive vehicle for the newly emerging identities and ideologies. In it, we have a fine example of what Bakhtin calls the polysemy of voices, where the same performance, expresses both official and unofficial ideologies. Such polysemy of voices has always been present in yakṣagāna (as analysed in the previous chapter), but in Tulu yakṣagāna the subaltern voice of the unofficial ideology is being expressed in loud and clear terms.

This assertion of linguistic and ethnic identity of Tulu culture is not restricted to Tulu yakṣagāna alone. This process can also be recognised in another important cultural expression of Tulu land, Bhūtarādhane. This ritual was observed in great devotion with fear and awe, but now the ritual is getting transformed into a celebration. The Kōla (annual festival) performance is now announced in newspapers and banners are put up. The area of performance is decorated with festoons and electric lights. All these changes point to how, what in the past was a serious ritual, is now in the process of becoming a celebration and a means of asserting a particular person's or a community's identity.
Tułu yakṣagāna, as it is developing now, stands as a fine example of what Richard Bauman calls, "the emergent quality of performance". By this, he refers to how the text and the event structure are not static but emerge during the performance. In addition, he makes another important observation about how the social structure itself may emerge during performance. He says, "In addition to text and event structure, we may uncover a third kind of structure emergent in performance, namely social structure". This emergent quality of social structure is not of course confined only to performance, but cultural forms, being potent forms of expression, may and often do, contribute to the emerging social structure.

This emergent quality of social structure in performance becomes more pronounced when the society is undergoing a process of change. As Bauman says, "The emergent structure of performance event is of special interest under conditions of change as participants adapt established patterns of performance to new circumstances". Tułu yakṣagāna is a fine example of how the established form is used for expressing the new discourse. Tułu yakṣagāna has thus not merely become an expression of social change but has also become an agent of that change.

6.5. OTHER VISTAS

So far, in this chapter, the question of change in yakṣagāna has been studied with reference to aspects like the process of secularisation and the emergence of Tułu yakṣagāna. There are many other facets also to the changes taking place in yakṣagāna now. These changes, some subtle and others not so subtle, are reshaping and recoding the traditional form.
They are signs of a living sign system whereby it tries to retain its relevance as a powerful means of cultural expression. Some of these changes are attempted by scholars and educated persons in an attempt to 'purify' the form (and make it elitist). Other changes are made by professional artistes and the managers of commercial troupes to attract more spectators. Some aspects of the change, not referred to so far, are taken up here.

6.5.1. New prasangas in Kannada

When commercial troupes came into existence and became well entrenched a few decades back, the demand arose for new prasangas. The writing of prasangas has always been going on in yakṣagāṇa. But with commercialisation, this activity got a new boost. This is because the troupes have adopted a policy of including at least one new prasanga in their repertory every season, in order to attract the customers. So, many a time, the authors are assigned the task of writing new prasangas by the troupes.

In the beginning years of commercialisation, the new prasangas that were written, were usually in the traditional mould itself and dealt with incidents from classical sources that were not already dealt with in yakṣagāṇa. In due course, prasangas based on the legends of local deities and folk heroes also came to be written. But later, new prasangas, that were purely imaginary in the sense that they were not based either on the classical or on the folk themes, also came to be written. (A similar development in Tuḷu yakṣagāṇa has already been referred to.) In the beginning, such prasangas were opposed by the traditionalists but now they have come to be part of yakṣagāṇa. In baḍagutiṭṭu,
almost every troupe (including the open-air troupes) perform these prasangas and they have become very popular. More and more such prasangas are being written every year.

The themes of these new prasangas have often been drawn from various sources. If some prasangas are based on literary works in Kannada, a few others have drawn their inspiration from western classics. Many do not seem to have any such known source. In the structure of these prasangas also, there does not seem to be any discernable common pattern except that many seem to have been written according to a fixed formula to include popular scenes of yakṣagāna like jalakrīde (playing in water), scenes of battle, those involving baṇṇadavēsa, etc.

These new prasangas by and large, reflect the same value system and world view that is represented in the traditional prasangas. Though some of these values are coming under challenge and undergoing a process of change in society (like the traditional hierarchical division of society for example), these new prasangas propound the same. In the words of Chandrashekara Damle, "In the performance of these stories also, the values of the bygone feudalistic society are depicted - Fatelism, caste inequalities, the theory of Karma, one's caste being decided by one's karma of the previous life, inequalities due to birth - these are the values depicted".47

The propagation of such values and world view, has enabled these prasangas to be accepted even by traditional viewers. But to assume that, this is the only message communicated by these prasangas would be wrong. Even as these prasangas implicitly accept and work within this
framework of traditional morality and world view, many new voices and new themes have been dealt with and depicted. For example, the prasanga, Śūdra Tapaswini (The Śūdra Woman Meditator) at the manifest level, conveys the retrograde message that the son of a Śūdra woman is bound to take the sinful path. But, the text also depicts the fight for justice and equality by the Śūdra woman who has been cheated. In Nāgaśri, one of the major characters is that of a fisher woman. Such a character had rarely appeared in yakṣagāna. (The fishing community is a major community in the coastal district.) A prasanga like Sati Susīle (The Chaste Wife) is full of scenes of drunkenness, lechery, rape and infanticide. After elaborately depicting such scenes of depravity, the prasanga ends with the message that such sins will not go unpunished. Thus, many a time, the framework of traditional values that these prasangas depict, remains only a framework within which the writers and artistes take the freedome to depict new, often opposite messages. So, many a time, the moral order and world view of the traditional prasangas are retained as an excuse and only lip sympathy is paid to them, so that these prasangas become acceptable even as other messages are being transmitted.

This new found freedom regarding the themes, has also been used by many writers to project more immediate and relevant topics. A recent prasanga by Amruta Someshwara deals with the problems of ecology-pollution and deforestation; (ecological concerns have become a major issue in coastal and Malenad regions of Karnataka now).

In spite of the opposition by traditional viewers of yakṣagāna in the beginning, these new prasangas in Kannada have become an accepted fact now. These prasangas have
become extremely popular. The popularity of these new prasangas can be gauged by the following remarks by Vithala Beladi. "If a new prasanga is being performed, sometimes it is even difficult to get tickets ... [These new prasangas] have even been the reason for the economic prosperity of many troupes". This popularity of these 'fictitious' prasangas perhaps points to the reduced appeal of the religious discourse and messages of the traditional prasangas. (In the previous section, we have seen how even these are being reinterpreted now). Another factor that may be mentioned here is that these new prasangas are more popular with the younger generation and the new spectators.

Though these new prasangas deal with different themes, the temporal frame of a bygone age, when kings, gods and demons moved freely on earth is always maintained. As a result, unlike Tulu yaksagana, the atmosphere of fantasy is retained in these prasangas. By and large, the traditional costume structure is also maintained. Dance and music also have not undergone any drastic change. Perhaps because of these reasons, the opposition to these prasangas by scholars and critics has not been as vehement as to that of Tulu yakṣagāna.

6.5.2 Shivarama Karanth's experimental troupe - Yakṣaranga

The changes that have been dealt with so far, are those that have emanated from 'within', in the sense that they have been changes brought about by the troupes themselves - the artists, the organisers, the managers of troupes, etc. Many of these changes have not, at least in the beginning, been conscious attempts. At the same time, there have been other changes that may be called changes from 'without'. These are
the conscious efforts of scholars, critics, and others to change or to 'purify' the form. Attempts to perform yakṣagāṇa in different languages, to popularise a shortened version (about 3 hours' duration) are some examples of such an effort.

The most important of these experiments, was the experimental troupe, Yakṣaranga started by Shivarama Karanth. Apart from writing extensively on yakṣagāṇa, Karanth has also been experimenting in yakṣagāṇa for many years. After several years of such experimentation, a regular troupe Yakṣaranga was started in 1975.50

Karanth was inspired by western ballet and by Indian dance traditions like Kathakali and Bharatanatyam, where speech is not used and communication takes place mainly through music and dance. Karanth's main effort was to popularise yakṣagāṇa in non-Kannada speaking areas, but for such an effort, language in the form of the improvised text was a big impediment. So, he decided to get rid of the improvised text altogether. Because of this fundamental change, other changes also followed. Music and dance now had to take over the function of the improvised text. For this, great attention was paid to the clarity of articulation in singing. Instead of one, two singers were used. Certain modifications were made in dance also. The emphasis now was on the expression of the particular emotional state through body movements and steps. Great attention was paid to the choreography and composition of group movements. Slight changes were made in costumes also. Instead of the heavy headgears and accoutrements, lighter ones made of aluminium and cardboard were used. Attention was paid to the costumes of even minor characters. A new costume was designed for
female characters. The overall design and pattern of colour and costume, became the important factor in deciding individual details.

Karanth's experiments have succeeded in making yakṣaṅgāna known in the non traditional areas. If yakṣaṅgāna is today recognised as an important traditional dance drama form of India, a large part of the credit for this, belongs to Karanth. These experiments have had their impact on professional troupes also. A greater awareness regarding the overall design and neatness in costumes now, can be attributed to the efforts of Karanth. The same may be said about the greater attention paid to dance, particularly in baḷagutitṭu.

But Yakṣaranga was vehemently attacked by traditional yakṣaṅgāna artistes and viewers for the many changes that Karanth had introduced. Getting rid of the improvised text was particularly seen, as destroying the very essence of yakṣaṅgāna. Padyana Venkateshwara Bhat for example, says, "By giving up such a powerful aspect of yakṣaṅgāna [improvised dialogues], efforts may be made to establish yakṣaṅgāna on the international scene, but such a step would definitely mean the death of yakṣaṅgāna in the place of its origin".51

On the whole, one can say that the influence of Karanth's experimental troupe, Yakṣaranga on the audience and on the professional troupes has been minimal. Two reasons may be adduced for this:

1. The absence of the improvised text
2. The concept of the director superimposing his vision on the entire performance
1. In chapter IV we have observed how the improvised text is one of the important features of yakṣaṅāṇa. By removing this element completely, one of the unique features of yakṣaṅāṇa was left out. Not merely the potential of speech as an artistic device whereby the artiste can express his individuality was removed, but the process of communication (in which language in the form of dialogues played an important part), itself became hampered. In addition, the improvised text is an important means through which yakṣaṅāṇa is being continuously reinterpreted and the two temporal and spatial worlds (the epic world of performance and the present world of the audience), bridged. So, without such a powerful medium of expression, the audience found the experiment difficult to accept.

2. In Yakṣaranga, Shivarama Karanth was the director and the performance was the product of his artistic and intellectual conception. All the artistes functioned under his supervision and according to his guidance. This kind of a practice, of the director controlling the entire performance, is common practice in theatrical productions now, but is unheard of in yakṣaṅāṇa. Though yakṣaṅāṇa is a group activity where many performers function together, the idea of a director or one person exercising total artistic control has never been there. Each actor is free to create the character according to his vision and talent and would strongly object the incursion by any one else into his domain. In spite of such an individual approach, the performance, which is a group activity, goes on because of the strongly built up tradition. This kind of a creative process, where the artistic product is the result of the combination of many individual efforts rather than the product of one individual intellect, is typical of the folk culture.
Even today, in spite of the many changes, yakṣaṇa troupes do not have a ‘director’. The superimposition of one intellect over the entire performance, whereby it becomes the creation of one person is never found in yakṣaṇa. If Karanth’s experiment did not have a strong impact on yakṣaṇa troupes and artistes, the reasons may be found in this. Shambu Hegde commenting on Karanth’s experiment says, "... this may remain only as an experiment and there are no signs of it becoming a tradition".53

Yakṣaranga may not have become a tradition but there is no doubt about Karanth’s contribution to yakṣaṇa. It was largely due to his efforts that yakṣaṇa was recognised as an important dance-drama form of India. His research and contribution in the areas of yakṣaṇa music, costume and choreography have also been of great importance. But in trying to purify and classicalise the form, he did not recognise the ‘communal’ nature of yakṣaṇa (in the sense that it represented the ethos of the entire community). So, the social dimensions of the traditional form or of the changes taking place in it now, are not recognised by him.

6.6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have seen how yakṣaṇa is a living sign system that is continuously being recoded and restructured. The changes taking place in yakṣaṇa have to be seen from the holistic perspective of the changing society, where contending groups and ideologies try to appropriate and shape the discourse of yakṣaṇa. Thus yakṣaṇa becomes a fine example of ‘invented tradition’, where the traditional form is being redefined so as to become a vehicle for meanings for which it was never originally
intended. To fail to recognise these changes or to oppose all change in the name of tradition, would amount to being blind to the changing social dynamics and the culture making processes of a community.