INTRODUCTION
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The traditional theatre forms and performing arts of India have attracted national and international attention in recent times. Folklorists as well as practitioners of theatre have been evincing a keen interest in the multifarious forms of folk performing arts of India. If folklorists are studying these forms as examples of folk culture and performance, theorists and practitioners of theatre, are trying to find in these forms an alternative to the proscenium bound realistic theatre of the West.¹ Jerzy Grotowsky, Peter Schechner, Uwgenio Borba and Philip Zarelli are some of the theatre personalities of the west, who have shown such an interest in these forms.

The theatre activitists in India are also turning to these traditional forms to find answers to many of the problems posed by modern theatre in India, which has, by and large, followed the western model and it is only recently that the practitioners of theatre in India are turning to these indigenous models. They are trying to evolve an authentic Indian theatre, based on the folk and traditional models.²

My interest in yakṣagāna, stems from a folkloristic as well as from a theatrical perspective. I have been actively involved in the theatre activities in Karnataka for the past twenty five years in different capacities; as actor, backstage worker, director, organiser and playwright. Being keenly aware of the inadequacies of the kind of theatre we were engaged in, it was natural that yakṣagāna should attract my attention as an alternative form of theatre that not merely exhibited great potential and theatrical ingenuity,
but also formed an integral part of the cultural ethos of the people. Being born and raised in the region where yaksagāna ia a living performing art, I have been witnessing yaksagāna performances since my childhood. So, it was perhaps natural for me to ponder over some of the characteristics of yaksāgana that have fascinated me since my childhood.

Yaksagāna is the traditional dance-drama performing art of Karnataka. Its two main geographical variants are mūḍālapāya (eastern style) and Paḍuvalapāya (western style—also known as coastal yaksagāna). Mūḍālapāya is performed in most parts of Karnataka and coastal yaksagāna is popular in the two coastal districts and adjoining areas. The coastal yaksagāna is a living popular form even now. There are about twenty professional troupes each offering between 150 to 180 performances per season, other than hundreds of amateur troupes that perform infrequently. The word yaksagāna has often been used only with reference to coastal yaksagāna (paḍuvalapāya) because of its greater popularity and perhaps because of the greater sophistication it has achieved over the years. The coastal yaksagāna, is therefore, the subject of the present study. For reasons of convenience, it has been referred to as yaksagāna in the present study.

Not much is known about the origin of yaksagāna, though various theories and possibilities have been posited. In its present form, yaksagāna seems to have had an uninterrupted existence of about four hundred years. It has survived largely on the support and patronage of rural folk for centuries. It is highly popular in rural and semiurban areas even today and surprisingly, the highly influential modern forms of entertainment like cinema and television, have not affected the popularity of yaksagāna in any significant way.
Yakṣagāna has been over the centuries, a major form of expression of the coastal and Malenad regions and as such occupies a central place in the cultural ethos of the people. (By comparison, the modern theatrical activity, has, by and large, remained a peripheral activity; confined to small groups in cities and urban centres.) If yakṣagāna has such a central place in the cultural ethos of this region, it can probably be because the community perceives it as relevant and significant. No form of cultural expression, speaking theoretically, can remain highly popular and continue to be so, unless it fulfils the collective psychic and emotional needs of the people. The form must, at the denotative or connotative level, reflect the collective joys and sorrows and the shared anxieties or paradoxes of a society. Otherwise there is the danger of the form becoming frozen. Yakṣagāna has not become frozen and is a living vibrant form even today. What then is its significance? What does it mean to the people who perform and receive it and what kind of messages are communicated in it? In conclusion what does yakṣagāna mean to the performers and to the community which has nourished, preserved and popularised it?

When one is studying a trational and at the same time, a living art form such as yakṣagāna, then one is bound to face issues of significance and function and the roles these play in the performance traditions of a society. At the apparent level, yakṣagāna deals with classical themes drawn from Indian epics and mythology, where any direct bearing upon the lives of the people, seems remote, except for the ritualistic appeal. Therefore the meaning and significance of yakṣagāna, has to be searched for, in a deeply underlying immanent discourse. In that case, the form will have to be viewed as
a symbolic system, where only an interpretative approach can unravel the underlying meanings and help us understand the significance of yakṣagāṇa.

The past few decades have been a period of great change for yakṣagāṇa. The performing troupes unlike in the past, are now being organised on a commercial basis; new themes not based on classical sources are being offered in this new, changed form of yakṣagāṇa; performances in Tuḷu (one of the Dravidian languages, spoken primarily in Dakshina Kannada district) are becoming phenomenally popular; new experiments are being made on various aspects such as music, dance, improvised text, costume etc. of the performance. Some of these changes seem so fundamental that they sometimes appear like redefining the form itself. From what perspective should one view these changes? Are these changes in any way related to the continuing popularity of yakṣagāṇa and to the changes which have taken place or are taking place in the society currently, or are they merely the result of commercial compulsions? (which, however, is in itself a significant social change). How have these changes reshaped and restructured the significatory processes of yakṣagāṇa? This is an important question which one cannot afford to ignore if the yakṣagāṇa of the present is to be understood in its dominant cultural context. The past studies of yakṣagāṇa, have for the most part, been historical and descriptive in nature and have rarely dealt with the significatory process of yakṣagāṇa as a performance. For example, the two studies in English on yakṣagāṇa, one by Shivarama Karanth and the other, by B.Martha Ashton and Bruce Christie are both basically descriptive studies. In addition, both these studies deal only with the traditional format of open-air performances and do not take into
cognisance, the changes that are taking place in yakṣaṅ̄a at the present time. A few studies in Kannada do focus attention on the problem of meaning and communication in yakṣaṅ̄a, but most of these are brief studies dealing with only specific aspects of the sign system of yakṣaṅ̄a. In these studies the changing facet of yakṣaṅ̄a, has also, for the most part, been viewed from the limited perspective of tradition versus change within the performance without any reference what so ever to the changes which are taking place in the society. The central focus of the present study is therefore, a departure from such studies as it aims to analyse the significatory process of yakṣaṅ̄a and study it in relation to the structure and ideology of the society in which this form of performance exists and communicates.

In order to understand the meaning and significance of yakṣaṅ̄a, one has to study it as a communicative process with due attention to the signals and the relationship that exists between them and the messages that they communicate. The signals of yakṣaṅ̄a, as the case of any true performance, are both verbal and nonverbal. An ensemble of sign systems like music, language, body movement, costume, colour, etc. function collectively in creating and communicating the message. To analyse the message/messages, emanating from yakṣaṅ̄a performances, one has to look into the structure of the performance text, the ritualistic framework, the different sign systems and how these function together as embedded forms. The form and its signification at the same time, can not be analysed in isolation, without reference to the 'users' of the sign system. The form, as we know it, functions in a cultural context that is conditioned by social, political, economic and other constraints and as
such, the form has to be situated in the social context where it operates and where alone it receives its meaning in performance.

For the study of yakṣagāna and its significatory system, the present work has made use of semiotics, which has emerged as one of the most important theoretical perspectives for the study of meaning systems and communicative processes. The use of semiotics does not mean cluttering folkloristics with one more theory. Folklore studies have always been one of the primary interests of semioticians from the very beginning. Consider the following remarks of Janet Langlois:

... The phrase 'folklore and semiotics' is not yoked by violence together' but actually summarises at least three decades of joint scholarship... It points to an underlying unity in these approaches towards folklore and folklife as significant cultural systems; it becomes an overarching category containing some of the most fruitful methodologies of the past and possibly of the future as well.5

Semiotics is a discipline that studies signs and sign systems. Its main concern is with signification and/or communication. "Semiotic investigation is possible", writes Jonathan Culler, "only when one is dealing with a mode of signification or communication. One must be able to identify effects of communication—the meanings objects and events have, for participants and observers"6. The basic premise of semiotics is that signification or communication can take place only through signs. These signs are not entities that contain meanings within them, but derive their meaning as part of the structure. Semiotics studies the system and the
structure (la langue) that underlies and makes possible, individual meaningful events (la parole). So, it concerns itself with the study of the system as it operates at a given point of time and studies the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of signs and how these generate meaning.

The conceptual tools of semiotics have mostly been drawn from linguistics, but semiotics takes into its ambit of study, both verbal and nonverbal sign systems. Thus for the study of a complex form like yakṣagāna that makes use of verbal and nonverbal signs and different media like dance, music, language, etc. semiotics lends itself as an appropriate methodology.

Within semiotics also, various theories and approaches have developed for the study of different sign systems. In fact, the theoretical positions taken by different authors, have sometimes been so diverse that, "... rather than being a single unified discipline", writes Sándor Hervey, "semiotics is an agglomeration of approaches with varying points of focus, varying points of view and varying scopes". Inspite of such a proliferation of theories and approaches, no universal theory of signification, encompassing all aspects of communication, has yet emerged. For the study of a performing art like yakṣagāna, that makes use of multiple channels of communication, no single theoretical approach will enable one to study all its aspects thoroughly. So, this study has followed an eclectic approach, drawing from different theories and approaches, but keeping the main argument within the bounds of semiotic theory.

One of the recent developments in semiotics, has been the realisation that the study of sign systems and structures
cannot be done in isolation from its social use. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress, for example, point out how in semiotics, the question of meaning is most often studied in isolation, divorced from social and political thought. Instead, they propose the concept of 'social semiotics'. Consider for example, their following remarks:

Social semiotics is primarily concerned with human semiosis as an inherently social phenomenon in its sources, functions, contexts and efforts. It is also concerned with social meanings constructed through full range of semiotic forms, through semiotic texts and semiotic practices in all kinds of human society in all periods of human history.

Therefore, in order to analyse the social significance of yakṣaṇa, the present study has also leaned heavily on the performance theory, that has emerged as one of the major modern approaches to the study of performance in folkloristics. The application of performance theory, however, does not mean a shift in the theoretical perspective of this study. Performance theory has evolved as an approach specific to folkloristics, but it has been influenced by semiotics in general and specially by the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, Roman Jacobson and Petr Bogatyrev. Performance theory has redefined many concepts of semiotics, especially in laying equal emphasis on la langue and la parole and in viewing folklore 'texts' as socially situated and emerging in the performance itself. Richard Bauman is of the opinion that performance theories can be perceived as an advancement of semiotic perspective. According to him:
I want to suggest... some of the ways in which the work of current folklorists goes beyond the work of the founders [of semiotics]... charting directions that should be of interest to the students of semiotics of literature both oral and written.  

Yakṣagāna, therefore, is examined in this study in the light of the theoretical postulates described above. The study centres round the basic question of how meaning is generated and communicated in yakṣagāna. The thesis begins with a consideration of the growth and development of semiotics, the methodology primarily applied in this thesis. Yakṣagāna is then studied in relation to the other performing arts of Karnataka and South India in the Second Chapter.

The significatory process of yakṣagāna is studied by focussing attention on the performance. So, the performance text is studied from the perspective of its structure and its convergence and divergence from the structure of the written text. The received text of yakṣagāna includes both the written text and the oral, traditional text regarding performance. The oral text plays an important role in shaping the performance text. Important aspects such as the structure of the organisation, the structure of the audience, the concept of space in yakṣagāna, have been discussed as the main subject matter of the paradigmatic analysis (Chapter Three). The multichannel communication system of yakṣagāna and the problems posed by it are important in understanding the meaning because the messages emanating from one medium are reshaped by the messages that the other sign systems project. These issues have been examined and analysed in Chapter Four in the light of acting and histrionic representation one encounters in yakṣagāna.
The distinction between text and discourse, becomes important in the study of cultural processes. The discourse is always embedded in the text and can be reached only by a process of decoding. The discourse of yakṣagāna is also encoded at a deeply immanent level and can be understood by analysing it as a symbolic system. The symbolic meanings in turn can be understood by situating them in the society where they operate. Only then can one understand the 'official' and 'unofficial' ideologies (to use Bakhtin's terms), that the yakṣagāna discourse represents. This symbolic significance as well as the ritualistic framework of yakṣagāna have been discussed and examined in Chapter Five.

The changing facet of yakṣagāna of the present can be understood in the proper perspective by viewing it holistically, in the light of the changes that are taking place in the society at the present times. These changes are transformed into signs, reflecting the newly emerging social situations. The changes taking place in the democratic Indian society that is emerging from a tradition bound, rigidly stratified agrarian society into a pluralistic society with a dominant market economy, naturally becomes central to the understanding of yakṣagāna of the present. Such an approach should reveal how a traditional form like yakṣagāna is now being used to convey radically different messages, thus becoming an example of what sociologists call 'invented tradition'. These and other aspects are examined in Chapter Six.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Balvant Gargi for example, says, "Indian Folk theatre has recently captured the interest of contemporary playwrights and directors. The city theatre modeled on the nineteenth-century picture frame stage, has little new to offer; the classical dance-dramas with their thick textured music and gesture language are esoteric. It is the folk theatre lying scattered in rural areas of India which has exciting forms". Folk Theatre of India, (Calcutta : 1991), p.IX.

2. The theatrical work of directors like B.V.Karanth, Ratan Thiyam etc. may be cited as examples of this growing trend in modern Indian theatre.

3. Shivarama Karanth, the famous Kannada literary figure, who has also worked extensively on yakṣagāna, believes that it must have come into existence, some where between 1400 A.D. - 1500 A.D. See Shivarama Karanth, Yakṣagāna (Mysore : 1974), pp.128-131.


10. See Wayne Ashley, Recodings : Ritual, Theatre and Political Display in Kerela State. South India, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, pp.23-24, where this term is discussed.