Alternative Media: New Dimensions

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Abstract

Yakshagana has been transmuted into a public forum and a cogent information system where information and criticism on political, social and economic issues are expressed unhesitatingly.

Introduction:

Sage Bharata sums up the virtues of folk theatre by stating that, “Drama gives love to those who are eager for it, admonishes the ill bred and unruly, gives courage to cowards, strength to the chivalrous, hints for acquiring wealth to those who are anxious to earn it, enlightenment to the poor intellect, diversion to kings, peace to the afflicted........”.

As a collective art, folk theatre is believed to have imbibed these virtues and has been serving society since ages with noble intentions. Yakshagana is one of the outstanding folk theatrical forms of India. It is firmly rooted in the coastal belt of Karnataka State. As a living philosophy, Yakshagana has revolutionised the folk media in India. In the process it has raised some critical issues of using folk media for development.

A close observation of the finer elements of Yakshagana reveals that it makes extensive use of independent creative elements viz., gestures, facial expressions, body movements, costume, make-up, music, dance and dialogue. It is a visual splendour owing to the use of unique, heavy and gorgeous costumes and make-up.

Though the themes of Yakshagana are mythological, the artistes have endeavoured to interpret them to suit the contemporary situation thus giving not only inspiration but enthuse the audience to develop new attitude
towards it. The conventional themes represented valour, self-sacrifice, idealism and virtues with an assumption that these themes would perpetuate morality among the people.

The pioneering attempt was made in 1985 to adopt Yakshagana in support of a message related to environmental conservation. An innovative venture of a great Yakshagana exponent Shri Manjunatha Bhagavata, this programme was extremely successful in the entire state of Karnataka.

Entitled ‘Nisarga Sandhana’ meaning ‘A Treaty with Nature’, it is faithful to creative devices of Yakshagana. The pattern of dance, the style of costuming, make-up, rhythmic body movement, footwork, music and narrative style have been retained unaltered subsequently strengthening the pristine purity of the modified performance.

This indigenous programme has taken advantage of the Hindu mythology which advocates the worshipping of deities of nature. Accordingly, one finds in this experiment an innovative depiction of celestial characters viz., deities of weather (Vayu), rain (Varuna) and fire (Agni) along with a plethora of characters which are concrete, abstract, animate as well as inanimate symbolising mountain, nature, progress, king of experiment, evil, decadence, power, goodness, utility and welfare.

The play illustrates these characters as allegorical of modern concepts like environmental destruction, pollution and deforestation ultimately depicting how man seems to be at war with nature and very environment in which he finds himself and how nature hits back defensively and declares war against man.

The play in general illustrates the supremacy of environment and its control over the universe including man. The elaborate symbolism in the performance amply demonstrates the dangers involved in man’s aggression against environment as the battle with nature transforms into a fight against himself.
**Conceptualisation**

The conceptualisation of this play was inspired by the alarming and indiscriminate destruction and denudation of virgin forests in the State which has upset the eco-system in the region.

Encouraged by the success of ‘A treaty with Nature’, many *Yakshagana* troupes have come up with programmes on such topics like AIDS, Union Budget, Dankeel Draft etc., Interestingly these innovative *Yakshagana* programmes were conceived and staged by the folk artists without receiving financial support from the government. One of the reasons attributed to its success is the absence of governmental interference in the formulation of the programme.

In India it’s the governmental agencies viz., the directorate of Field Publicity, the Department of Information and Publicity and the Song and Drama Division which have been engaging folk media in support of development activities in the predominantly rural sectors in the country. This system has become counter productive. The performance of the state-controlled electronic media is appalling as it is run like any other government office. Consequently, it has become an insurmountable task to inject efficiency, competence and professionalism into the system.

Unfortunately this malady has afflicted the folk media too. Undeniably, folk media is promoting the message of the government in the way it is intended by the government. Folk media has, therefore, been branded as government media, promoting and protecting the interests of the establishment. As a consequence, its credibility has taken a nose dive. The veracity of the source of these development-oriented messages put across through folk media is being questioned.

It is in this perspective; the innovative play by the folk artistes of *Yakshagana* assumes importance. *Yakshagana* has been transmuted into a public forum and a cogent information system where information and criticism on political, social and economic issues are expressed unhesitatingly. It is noteworthy that the folk artistes have recognised the need to reflect changes in social environment by donning the role of a critic.
It implies that the presence of government is a major impediment in the successful application of folk media. It is the common man who should take initiative to participate in this interaction facilitated by the folk media. If the message is thrusted by the government, as being done now, it will boomerang, reducing the process of development through folk media into a total farce, an exercise in futility. The traditional channels are capable of transforming themselves into people’s media without necessary assistance from the government. The folk form of Yakshagana is a testimony to this.

Further, this endeavour has generated interest in the society with the active involvement of the intellectuals, teachers and students besides the villagers. Subsequently, folk media is no longer confined to rural pockets. Yakshagana has been instrumental in perpetuating a new information culture with the active participation of both villagers and city dwellers.

**Rural-Urban Interaction**

Historically, the concept of folk media gained currency at a time when the general perception of development was urbanisation, literacy and economic wellbeing. Today, the focus has shifted to total human development thus compelling one to question the rationale behind using folk media exclusively for the benefit of rural people presuming that the city dwellers are developed. The functional application of folk media becomes relevant only when rural and urban people interact with each other. For eg., in issues concerning agriculture, the policy makers are urban and the beneficiaries are rural. Since development is culture specific, this indigenous media will be enriched by the participation of people from all walks of life.

The search for the new paradigm of development is still on. Under the circumstances it’s worth stating that the process of development is moving in circles. The process of communication for development has come a full circle.
Accordingly, in the primitive society, folk art was a powerful social device which shouldered the responsibility of transmitting values, thoughts, norms, beliefs and experiences in society, strengthening the oral tradition in the process. The advent of technology transferred this socio-cultural task of development to mass media. Unfortunately, this task backfired as mass media intended to bring about development at the macro level and failed to generate active participation. Therefore, folk institutions which were dismissed as obstacles of development started gaining currency in order to obtain tangible results in the process of development.

Folk media is gradually evolving into a force to reckon with. Nevertheless, alternative media needs to be harnessed to become a people’s movement instead of an extension system of the government. The folk theatre of Yakshagana has set a precedent.