

From Village Square to Urban Stage: The Socio-Political Reinterpretation of Kannada Folk Arts in Contemporary Karnataka

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Abstract

This article examines the socio-political reinterpretation of Karnataka's folk theatre in recent decades. It focuses on Yakshagana and Janapada nataka in the coastal and Malnad (Western Ghats) regions, tracing their evolution from pre-colonial origins through colonial rule to the post-independence era. Employing a mixed methodology of historical review and article-books available, the study explicates how these rural art forms adapt to contemporary contexts. Both genres are shown to incorporate modern themes and social commentary while retaining mythological frameworks. Performances have shifted from all-night temple festivals to condensed urban stages (often reducing or altering traditional prologues and choreography for broader audiences). Key findings reveal that despite commercialization pressures, artists navigate preservation and innovation: new episodes and dialogues can reframe characters in political terms, yet core ritual conventions (such as the bhagavata narrator-singer and maddale drum ensemble) persist with symbolic resonance. This dynamic underscores how Kannada folk theatre continues to serve as a platform for community identity and socio-political discourse.

Keywords: Yakshagana; Janapada Nataka; Coastal Karnataka; Malnad (Western Ghats); Folk theatre; Socio-political symbolism; Cultural preservation and adaptation; Performance tradition.

Introduction

Kannada folk theatre has long been integral to Karnataka's cultural heritage. Forms such as Yakshagana and Janapada Nataka are especially prominent in the coastal districts and Malnad (Western Ghats) region. Yakshagana is a vibrant dance-drama combining vigorous dancing, singing, scholarly dialogue and colourful costumes in a night-long narrative performance. Janapada nataka (literally "folk play") refers broadly to village drama traditions that often blend comedy, myth and morality. These genres employ distinctive Kannada terminology: for example, a Yakshagana ensemble features a bhagavata (lead singer-narrator) and a maddale (hand drum) as core elements. Historically, such performances communicated epic tales and social values to rural audiences. Itinerant hagalu veshagaararu troupes, for instance, staged mythological and legendary plays in village squares, explicitly educating villagers about moral and social issues through their enactments.

Over time these folk arts have navigated Karnataka's changing historical currents. Yakshagana took shape as a distinct dance-drama by the 16th century, drawing on Sanskritic traditions of the Bhakti movement. Janapada plays likewise emerged from oral lore and temple festival routines. Under British colonial rule, these forms largely remained localized village arts, but post-independence they gained new visibility through state cultural agencies (e.g. the Karnataka Janapada Parishat) and media. Scholars note Yakshagana's long history (around 800 years) as a continuum between classical and folk elements. By the mid-20th century the art was transitioning from all-male, open-air temple theatre to staged presentations: performances moved indoors and women began training in Yakshagana from the 1970s onward. Similarly, Janapada Nataka began to appear not only at rural fairs but also at urban folk festivals and on television. These shifts reflect broader socio-cultural changes in Karnataka's postcolonial society.

Despite extensive description of form and style, there is a significant gap in research on how Kannada folk theatre is reinterpreted today. This study addresses that gap by linking historical context with contemporary ethnography. It explores three interrelated themes: socio-political symbolism (how performances encode caste, gender, community or political meanings), preservation versus adaptation (debates over maintaining traditional content and style versus modifying them for new audiences), and commercialization (the impact of market forces, tourism and media on performance). For example, recent practitioners note that some troupes "omit most of the rich materials of the prologue" and introduce elaborate

dances influenced by film choreography, while others explicitly insert modern social issues into ancient myths. We also examine how these forms appear on contemporary platforms (such as Janapada Loka folk festivals or online videos) and how artists view these transitions.

The paper draws on archival sources, critical literature, and sourced folk artists to ensure the arguments are grounded in lived performance contexts. The introduction above outlines the historical grounding and research needs; the following sections then detail the historical trajectories, analyze thematic content and symbolism, examine modern adaptations in performance practice, present artist perspectives, and reflect on the balance of tradition and innovation. In doing so, this article illuminates how Kannada folk theatre – once the province of village squares – is being reinterpreted on India’s urban stages.

Yakshagana: Coastal Dance-Drama Traditions

Yakshagana (ಯಕ್ಷಗಾನ) is the night-long folk theatre of coastal Karnataka. It integrates dance, music, dialogue and elaborate costumes into mythic storytelling. Traditionally performed in a temporary open-air stage adorned with mango and palm leaf canopies after the harvest, Yakshagana troupes (mela) would dance and recite prasangas (ಪಟ್ಟಕ್ಕಧೆಗಳೆ) from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Purāṇas. In this setting, the bhagavata (lead singer-narrator) intones verse while dancers enact the story with vigorous abhinaya (dance-acting) – employing mudras (hand gestures) and bhāvas (expressive facial moods) to convey the drama.

Yakshagana evolved into two main regional styles. In the Thenkutittu (southern) style of Dakshina Kannada–Kasaragod, performances are fast-paced, loud and infused with Carnatic musical idioms. Here even the elaborate prasanga is introduced by a frenzied oddolāga (court assembly) dance, and lively hāgale veṣa (“daytime disguise”) comic interludes keep audiences laughing late into the night. By contrast, the Badagutittu (northern) style of Udupi–Uttara Kannada is more restrained, with subtle dance steps influenced by Hindustani music and more formal choreography. Scholars note that both forms have absorbed regional flavors: coastal Yakshagana bears traces of Kerala’s Kathakali (especially in makeup and costume), while northern Yakshagana develops through Kannada-Tulu linguistic rhythms. In all variants, key characters – Rama, Krishna, Ravana, Hanuman, and fantastical demons – burst forth in garish headgear and gaudy makeup, underscoring the otherworldliness of these nāṭyaraṅga (drama stages). As one ethnomusicologist observes, “basic traditions have stuck

on, and moulded to accept changes in society”: Yakshagana still dances with its epic past even as artists innovate with modern sensibilities.

Technically, a Yakshagana performance unfolds with ritual precision. A prologue (pūrvāranga) begins at dusk with rhythmic keli beats on the chende drum to summon spectators. After offerings to Ganesh and invocations, young balagopāla boys enter in brisk dance, setting a playful tone. Then the assembly (oddolāga) introduces the royal court in stately fashion, where the rāja veṣha (hero in regal disguise) is introduced amidst ministers and clowns. Only after these preliminaries does the main prasanga begin – for example, the slaying of Kamsa or the burning of Lanka – giving audiences familiar with the epic plenty of spectacle and narrative. All through, the bhagavata controls the pace, alternating sung paddanas (verses) with improvised artha (dialogue). Notably, Yakshagana performers often use vākyārtha (ವಾಕ್ಯಾರ್ಥ) – clarifying the meaning behind complex lines – ensuring villagers understand even Sanskrit-derived content. Early-morning sequences of victory celebrations or sunrise rituals (“Vilāve”) conclude the performance. This full-night format, once common, has in modern times given way to shorter “limited-time” shows, but the core elements – drums, dance, and mythic storyline – remain.

Yakshagana’s dancers and musicians are often hereditary practitioners (notably the Nāyaka and Hegde communities) who live in the theatre troupe system. Historically they were farmers who performed on fallow lands between crops, but today many are full-time artists. Coastal Karnataka’s villages still host Yakshagana melas during temple festivals, but city audiences now attend scheduled performances too – in Bangalore auditoriums and beyond. This outreach has introduced folk forms to new crowds (students in costumes at state celebrations) and prompted calls for UNESCO heritage status. As one scholar noted, “no form of cultural expression can remain highly popular... unless it fulfills the collective psychic and emotional need” – a condition Yakshagana meets by blending heroic romance with local humor.

Janapada Nataka and Plains Folk Theatre

Alongside Yakshagana lies Janapada nataka (ಜನಪದ ನಾಟಕ), a catch-all term for Kannada folk plays rooted in rural life. Literally “folk theatre,” Janapada nataka encompasses diverse village performances – from satirical prāhasaṇas (comical plays) to devotional suggi kūnita (harvest dance drama). In the Malnad and northern regions, Bayalāṭa (ಬಾಯಲಾಟ) dramas

are performed during fairs and temple festivals. Bayalāṭa (meaning “open-air theatre”) here often refers to overnight mythic plays in north Karnataka dialects. These are classified into Dodddata (big) and Sannata (small) dramas. Dodddata Bayalāṭa is energetic and large-scale – lavish costumes and mass choreography culminating in night-long enactments of purāṇic battles – while Sannata is shorter and simpler. In all cases, performers draw on local dialects (Kānnāda, Havyaka, Arebhashe or tribal languages) to reflect villagers’ lives. Indeed, “Janapada is the basic art form of theatre... a household word in most districts of Karnataka”.

Unlike the codified pages of Yakshagana epics, Janapada nataka is more flexible and improvisational. Scripts (often penned by local writers) are in colloquial Kannada or Tulu and interspersed with folk songs, bagpipe-like pipes and drum dance segments (Dollu). Comedy is key: Naagara bhāgas and Vidhūshaka (clowns) directly address audiences with current jibes. The staging is simpler too – sometimes a raised platform and three-sided seating under the open sky. Yet like Yakshagana, these plays project social messages. A village prasanga, for instance, might take the shape of a contemporary satire thinly veiled as a myth (“people of Kashi” type jokes). While detailed scholarship on Janapada nataka is sparse, cultural institutions like Karnataka’s Janapada Parishath treat it as a cherished rural legacy. The Janapada Loka museum (near Bangalore) even emphasizes Janapada Siri Bhuvana – the “world of folk wealth” – with live folk theatre and festivals held for urban audiences. This deliberately brings folk theatre, folk songs, and performing arts “transmitted to the urban elite” as living culture.

In sum, whether coastal Yakshagana or Malnad folk drama, these forms share a foundational bond with agrarian life and community ritual. They are “Siri Bhuvana” (a cosmos of folk lore) whose characters – gods, demons, clowns and cowards – are also figures from every village’s collective imagination. Performers are often from specific communities (e.g. Halakki Vokkaliga exorcists, Mala Jangama Hindu mendicants), further tying these arts to identity and caste. In both Yakshagana and Janapada nataka, bayalāṭa scenes (dance numbers) and dialogues in rustic Kannada affirm local culture. These performances do more than entertain: they reinforce social norms (dharma, duty), resolve village disputes (through moral fables), and honor deities. By giving voice to common people (through buffoon clowns or ṛṇarbhi plebeian characters), they historically have functioned as subtle platforms for social commentary – a tradition continuing today as we discuss below.

Socio-Political Reinterpretation and Modern Themes

In contemporary Karnataka, Yakshagana and Janapada nataka have increasingly engaged with present-day issues. Troupes experiment by interpolating modern themes into folk narratives. Scholars Padmanabha and Sathish note that, beyond epics, new prasangas now include imaginary social dramas, local temple legends, even awareness-oriented themes (health, literacy, politics). For example, a Yakshagana troupe might adapt a Mahabharata story to mirror rural land disputes, or stage gender-themed stories as Palamoura Yakshagana. Folk comedians (Nata performers) similarly lampoon current figures under the guise of demon-king caricatures. As one Yakshagana scholar puts it, “the artiste playing Jatayu is a journalist” – in other words, modern professionals join these troupes, weaving contemporary expertise into ancient form. This infusion of new blood keeps the drama relevant: college professors, even IT engineers, now don vesha and makeup because “they are passionate about it”.

The political dimension is explicit in some performances. Yakshagana episodes have been used to highlight social justice or critique corruption by subtext. In recent years, coastal troupes have staged stories of Dalit struggles or environmental issues disguised within epic frames. During elections, the Karnataka Janapada Academy even made folk icon Manjamma Jogathi (a transgender actress) its poster for civic participation – a move signaling the art’s broadening horizons. The Academy, traditionally run by older male elites, elected Jogathi as its first trans president in 2023, underscoring folk culture’s role in identity politics and inclusivity. Folk forms have thus become canvases for new identities to claim public space: gender-fluid performers on stage, tribal languages on display, and even marginalized castes narrating national epics in village-inflected verse.

At the same time, there is heightened state and intellectual attention on the heritage value of these arts. Government-sponsored events (Yakshagana Sammelana) and folk festivals celebrate these traditions as symbols of Karnataka’s unity. Speakers at a recent Sammelana emphasized that “Tulu language and culture should be given due credit” in Yakshagana’s growth, recognizing how coastal dialects enriched the form. At the same event, scholars warned that if “traditional elements” are lost, it would be a “permanent cultural loss” – explicitly linking folk practice to regional identity. Thus folk theatre now operates at the intersection of art and politics: it preserves collective memory while engaging with modern social issues.

Preservation vs. Adaptation: Contesting Traditions

The journey from village square to city theatre has not been without tension. Custodians of tradition often worry that commercialization and modernization may dilute the art's essence. Veteran artist Bellige Narayana Maniyani complained that Yakshagana lacks the institutional support that Kathakali enjoys – in Kerala, Kathakali stages stayed “in traditional grandeur,” whereas Yakshagana's form has shifted under pressure. Senior Yakshagana scholar M. Prabhakara Joshi criticizes recent trends of “loud noise culture” and bright floodlights at performances, arguing that excessive amplification and stagecraft undermine the art's subtleties. A concern voiced widely is that if artists lower artistic standards for commercial gain, Yakshagana could deform. As Joshi put it, troupes must not compromise “quality in performance” or push the art “into deformity”. These comments reflect anxiety that urban venues (which often have seated, paying audiences) could encourage truncated shows or superficial spectacle over the folk-rooted spirituality and improvisation.

Nevertheless, tradition adaptation is widely seen as essential for survival. H. L. Nage Gowda, founder of the Janapada Parishath, famously believed folk arts would only last if they “accommodate changed circumstances”. He urged society to keep supporting folk forms even if they no longer arose organically from village rituals. In practice, this has meant fitting Yakshagana into the modern schedule: official Yakshagana melas and studio recordings (often orchestrated by Janapada Loka) help sustain troupes. As described in Sahapedia, even though shortened performances skip some customs, they still “retain the glory” of the tradition for contemporary viewers. Ethnomusicologist Shubha Chaudhari observes that Yakshagana has “moulded to accept changes in society” while retaining core patterns.

In Janapada nataka, a similar negotiation occurs. Many troupes now stage plays in town auditoriums during urban fairs, rather than only in village squares. Dialogue scripts may insert modern Kannada words or jokes to appeal to city crowds. Yet, efforts like the rural Janapada Loka training programmes emphasize transmitting raw folk language and lore to an “urban elite”. The Siri Bhuvana ethos of Janapada Loka – to house living folk performances – embodies this bridge: it shows that even as audiences change, the art can persist if given institutional support and fresh contexts.

Overall, the preservation–adaptation tension is negotiated by keeping ceremonial core elements alive while innovating form and content. For instance, although women have only recently entered many Yakshagana melas, the all-night open-air tradition has largely been

kept: troupes still begin shows with drum calls (peetike) and maintain the ratha (throne) set-up of the stage. Janapada dramas still feature folk music and dancer percussion (bol Karnataka trombone), even if they now occur under electric lights. This gives resilience: as Maniyani noted, Yakshagana still captivates “in Karnataka and Kerala’s Kasaragod district,” owing to its timeless appeal.

Commercialization and Urbanization

A striking change is Yakshagana’s shift from itinerant village troupes to year-round professional performances. Coastal companies now tour festivals and city auditoriums, and audiences buy tickets as for a play. This commercialization brings both revenue and influence from popular culture. Electric lighting, stage design and media promotion (even YouTube clips) have modernized the presentation. But it also risks commodifying the art. Paid audiences expect a tighter 3–4 hour show (instead of a whole night), and sponsors may pressure troupes to shorten rituals. According to one report, 40 Yakshagana melas this season show “the audience now require tickets” – a far cry from village donation-based shows.

Urbanization also affects Janapada plays. As rural people move to cities for work, demand has risen for folk entertainment that evokes home. Community organizations hold folk festivals in Bengaluru and Mangaluru showcasing Dollu Kunitha and Janapada nataka; Janapada Loka hosts monthly folk events for city dwellers. Folk artists likewise find new livelihood: a village actor might now make guest appearances in a city folk troupe or on Kannada TV. In some ways, this turns folk theatre into cultural branding – artists become “folk celebrities” beyond their hamlet. For example, images of youth in Yakshagana headdress circulate on social media during state festivities.

However, urban contexts sometimes strip away intimacy. Yakshagana in a Bangalore auditorium loses the circle-of-spectators feel and the communal meal aspect of a village mela. Some critics worry the art is “dancing as a tourist attraction” rather than community ritual. As one scholar cautioned, a “matured theatre” should eventually want less noise and showier tricks. The politics of funding also comes into play: government subsidies and NGO grants can both preserve and steer folk productions. Cultural activists fear that over-formalizing folk arts might ossify them (as happened with classical dance in the 20th century). Janapada Loka’s mission explicitly tries to counter this by documenting “folk life and arts” in situ and encouraging folk practitioners themselves as custodians.

Representation, Identity and the Politics of Folk Performance

Kannada folk theatre has always been bound up with language and identity, and these politics intensify today. Regional pride is evident: Yakshagana is publicly celebrated as Karnataka's cultural pride, and coastal dialects (Tulu, Kannada) are foregrounded. During Rajyotsava (statehood day) celebrations, students in Yakshagana garb symbolize Kannada unity. Conversely, tension exists: some north Karnataka folk artists feel overlooked by Bangalore-centric cultural policy, lamenting that their dialect dramas (Bayalāṭa Dodddata) get less visibility. Janapada Loka's pan-Karnataka approach helps mediate this by promoting folk arts from Malnad, north and coastal alike under one roof.

Gender and caste identities surface on stage too. Traditional taboos (only men playing female roles, female exclusion from budaga jangama fields, etc.) are loosening. The Hindustan Times reports that more women are now joining Yakshagana ensembles, bringing fresh expression and audiences. Similarly, folk artists from Dalit and tribal backgrounds have won awards for Janapada performances (e.g. the Halakki Vokkaliga Gundaradi dance under Janapada Academy awards). The success of Dr. Manjamma Jogathi (transitioning from Jogati dance troupe member to Janapada Academy president) is emblematic: it signals that folk theatre can be a site of breaking rigid identity norms. On the flip side, some representation battles continue: there are debates over whose history is told. For example, urban Yakshagana troupes have produced plays about Karnataka's unification leader Aluru Venkata Rao, and even fictional folk heroes, to instill Kannada self-respect. These choices show how folk drama is consciously used to shape identity narratives in a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic state.

Conclusion

Contemporary Kannada folk theatre stands not at the edge of disappearance, but at a moment of profound negotiation. Yakshagana and Janapada nataka continue to resonate with the pulse of ancient memory—the vibrant vesha (costume), the reverberating chende and maddale, the improvised dialogues that breathe life into epic prasangas (ಪ್ರಸಂಗ – narrative episodes rooted in sacred lore). These elements remain unmistakably alive in coastal temple grounds and Malnad village fairs. Yet the context in which they unfold has undeniably transformed. The glow of oil lamps has, in many instances, given way to electric stage lights; the open bayalāṭa (ಬಾಯಲಾಟ – open-air performance) field now coexists with ticketed auditoriums and curated cultural festivals.

This transformation is neither accidental nor entirely imposed. It reflects broader historical processes—colonial interruption, post-independence cultural policy, regional linguistic assertion, globalization, and market economies. As folklorist H. L. Nage Gowda suggested, traditions endure when they adapt to altered circumstances without surrendering their internal coherence. Yakshagana and Janapada nataka exemplify this principle. The coastal performer still moves to the rhythm of the *kāli* drum even in metropolitan Bangalore, and the Malnad clown continues to articulate satire in rustic Kannada verse. However, both now engage with contemporary audiences whose expectations, political consciousness, and cultural consumption patterns differ markedly from those of earlier generations.

At their core, these art forms remain embodied cultural systems rather than mere aesthetic displays. They integrate dialect, gesture, music, costume, and improvisation into a cohesive performative grammar that encodes regional identity. The distinction between Tenkutittu and Badagutittu styles, the structural variations between Dodddata and Sannata, and the linguistic shifts from Sanskritic registers to vernacular Kannada and Tulu all demonstrate how geography, community, and history shape performance. Folk theatre here functions not only as entertainment but as a cultural archive—transmitting collective memory, moral frameworks, and regional self-understanding.

Simultaneously, the socio-political role of these performances has become increasingly visible. Contemporary reinterpretations insert themes of caste equity, gender justice, environmental ethics, and public awareness into mythological frameworks. Folk theatre thus continues its historic function as a medium of negotiation—between power and resistance, tradition and reform, ritual and critique. The stage becomes a site where Karnataka's evolving identity is debated and performed.

Yet tensions persist. Preservationists caution against excessive commercialization and aesthetic dilution, warning that compressing all-night rituals into time-bound spectacles risks eroding ritual depth and community participation. The migration of performances into urban markets and digital platforms expands reach but also subjects tradition to commodification. The challenge lies in ensuring that adaptation does not devolve into superficial spectacle detached from its cultural ecology.

At the same time, these transformations have fostered greater inclusivity. Women performers, transgender artists, and members of historically marginalized communities now participate more visibly in folk theatre spaces. Such developments complicate older caste- and gender-

bound hierarchies, reaffirming that tradition is not synonymous with exclusion. In this expanded representational field, Kannada folk theatre reflects the democratizing currents of contemporary society.

Ultimately, Yakshagana and Janapada nataka cannot be reduced to static relics of a bygone rural order. They are dynamic cultural processes negotiating continuity and reinvention. Their journey from the village square to the urban stage does not signify rupture but recontextualization. The echo of the prasanga in a city auditorium, the resonance of bayalāṭa rhythms in academic seminars and international festivals, and the continued transmission of folk repertoire to younger generations collectively testify to their resilience.

Kannada folk theatre today is therefore best understood as a living dialogue—between past and present, ritual and representation, locality and globalization. Rooted in community life yet responsive to shifting socio-political landscapes, it continues to evolve without severing its foundational ethos. The endurance of these traditions suggests that cultural vitality lies not in resisting change, but in shaping it with memory, responsibility, and creative integrity.

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