

## Traditional Gender Roles and Modern Shifts in *Yakṣagāna* Theatre

**Nagaranjitha S**

Senior Research Fellow

Department of Dance, Faculty of Performing Arts,  
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh

Email: [nagaranjitha.s@bhu.ac.in](mailto:nagaranjitha.s@bhu.ac.in)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5941-7439>

Vidwan ID: <https://vidwan.inflibnet.ac.in/profile/523116>

### Abstract

While the exclusive involvement of male artists in *Yakṣagāna* performances is often viewed as "gender discrimination," this paper explores the largely overlooked sociological and physiological factors that historically influenced women's abstention from this art form. Analyzing *Yakṣagāna* through the lens of traditional Indian theatre, the study focuses on gender dynamics shaped by societal norms, vocal demands, and the rigorous physicality of all-night, open-field performances. It also examines how modern developments such as technological advancements, urbanization, and globalization are reshaping participation and redefining gender roles in *Yakṣagāna*. This research offers a nuanced understanding of how shifts in social infrastructure and performance settings have contributed to increased female participation, challenging simplistic narratives of gender exclusion.

**Keywords:** Gender roles, Gender studies, Traditional Theatre, Yakshagana

### Research Problem

Contemporary gender studies on *Yakṣagāna* often linearly hypothesize that male exclusivity in performances is rooted in gender discrimination. However, such analyses may overlook the historical, cultural, and physiological contexts that traditionally limits women's participation. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring the complex sociological factors underpinning traditional gender roles in *Yakṣagāna*. By focusing on influences like technological advancements, urbanization, and globalization, this study aims to move beyond discrimination framework and provide a nuanced understanding of how and why gender roles in *Yakṣagāna* are evolving in modern times.

### Objective

The objective of this research is to investigate the sociological factors influencing gender roles and participation in *Yakṣagāna*. This study aims to analyze historical and contemporary gender dynamics within the theatre form. Identify the impact of technological advancements, urbanization, and globalization on traditional performance practices. Also aims to examine the role of sociocultural beliefs, physiological factors, and traditional norms in shaping gender

participation to provide a perspective that goes beyond a simplistic view of gender discrimination, aiming to uncover multiple layers of sociological influences.

### **Scope**

There is a need to explore the role of social dynamics in traditional theatre practices and in contemporary shifts. The influence of factors such as urbanization, technological developments and globalization, on traditional performance spaces and artist demographics needs to be examined. Comparative analysis of rural and urban performance contexts of the past and present is necessary to understand changing norms and audience expectations.

### **Limitations**

This research is limited to the theatre form *Yakṣagāna*. Historical documentation of this theatre form by the leading artists in these fields are also referred to make the study, while basing it on the oral tradition. Findings may be specific to *Yakṣagāna*.

### **Hypothesis**

Gender roles in *Yakṣagāna* were traditionally influenced by physiological factors and the demands of open-field, overnight performances, while contemporary shifts reflect changing sociocultural dynamics and performance settings.

### **Methodology**

The information pertaining to contemporary developments in performance spaces, women participation and reforms in the field of *Yakṣagāna* are qualitatively analyzed to deduce conclusions. The live performances of women artists of contemporary times are quoted as references wherever necessary. Historical records of contribution of women to the field of *Yakṣagāna* are used as secondary sources for the study.

### **Discussion**

*Yakṣagāna* traditional theatre form of Karnataka has a history that can be traced back to many centuries. Scholars place its origin from somewhere over 600 years (Bharadwaj, 2013) to even 900 years ago (Raghavan, 2004, p. 108). It includes the *Paḍivalapāya* variants such as *Tenkutittu*, and *Badagutittu*, while the *Mūḍalapāya* is another style of *Yakṣagāna* popular in other regions of Karnataka (K.V. & Kumar, 2019). Even to this day *Yakṣagāna* theatre form finds its abundant popularity in the coastal Karnataka region which is predominantly performed by men artists<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Terukūttu* is another similar (Raghavan, 2004, p. 88) traditional theatre form of south India predominantly performed by male artists and seeing women artists taking part in recent times

*Yakṣagāna* were performed by farmers in agricultural fields, so, often after the harvest season and before sowing the next crop is when they found some time to indulge in such creative ventures (Karanth, 2013, p. 262). However, this wasn't easy. The troupes moved from one place to another every day and staged the performances overnight. They had no built-up structures such as auditoriums or stages. It was a 20x20 flatted muddy square that was distinguished as stage using poles tied up with mango leaf buntings, without any screens or greenrooms screens except for the cloth held against the characters to depict their entry (Karanth, 2013, p. 262). Karanth also quotes that even the audience usually stood and watched the show. Musicians also stood and played instruments and sang the song louder in the fields as there were no other acoustic arrangements. This format of *Yakṣagāna*, and lack of logistical arrangements especially where the play happened for an entire night, perhaps did not attract the interests' women to take part in it.

*Yakṣagāna* theatre form that employs all four forms of *abhinaya* i.e., the *āṅgika*, *vācika*, *āhārya* and *sātvika*. *Vācika* is way more significant and prominent in this theatre in comparison to any other theatre form (Bhat, 2014). It is so prominent that *vācika* is performed as a separate entity called *tāla maddale* where there is no actor in *āhārya* but entire play's narration and the exchange of the dialogues are performed by a bhagavata along with the full musical ensemble of *Yakṣagāna* (Ramakrishnayya, 2003). Perhaps this significant *vācika* is due to the origin of this beautiful theatre form was in open spaces (Karanth, 2013, p. 262). The actors had to deliver their dialogues and sing the verses or the songs louder in the open spaces, initially to attract the crowd from far distances and to reach the audience sitting far and beyond audible range. This also explains why the *Yakṣagāna* music follows the upper octave. Studies on vocal sound pressure levels (SPL) show that, on average, male voices produce a higher SPL than female voices (around 96.98 dB for males versus 82 dB for females) (*Contribution of Laryngeal Size to Differences between Male and Female Voice Production* | *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* | AIP Publishing, n.d.). This difference and physiological factors such as laryngeal size and vocal fold thickness allows male voices to project louder and maintain clarity over greater distances, which would be particularly valuable in open-air settings without the use of any amplification technology (Pépiot, 2015). So, this demand of vocal intensity is a disadvantage for a female voice with average of around 82 dB making it to be softer. This stronger voice projection for the *Yakṣagāna vācika* could be a physiological reason which kept women away from taking part in these plays. So, considering the kind of voice culture required for *Yakṣagāna*, rather than looking at it as an exclusion, it looks more like women's disinterest in taking part due to the loudness and vocal endurance essentials. This requirement in turn may have influenced traditional norms leading to a predominance of male performers in *Yakṣagāna*.

---

(Balasubramanian, 2023). *Terukūttu* is performed during temple processions however the *Kaṭṭaikūttu* variant of this is performed in specific venue and is performed overnight.

Evidence otherwise shows that women of Karnataka region even during Vijayanagar period were so empowered that they were poets and playwrights themselves. Queen *Gaṅgādevi* whose Madhura Vijaya is even now played as a *Yakṣagāna prasāṅga*<sup>2</sup>. Women of Vijayanagara period chose their consort; a beautiful example of one such empowered women of Vijayanagar society is the protagonist *Mallikā*, found in the literature *Mallikāmaruta* play (Anantharaman, 2006). *Varadāmbikā Parīṇayaṃ* written by queen *Tirumalamba* is another example of a theatrical masterpiece contributed by learned women of Karnataka during 16<sup>th</sup> century (Ayyangar, 1919). Clearly, rather than choosing roles that weren't feasible for their busy lifestyles they rather chose wiser ways to contribute to theatre arts in different ways.

## Findings

This research paper finds that rather than discrimination of gender roles, there are many sociological factors influencing the domination of male performers in this art form. So, the analysis suggests that:

1. **Practical and Physiological Factors:** *Yakṣagāna* theatre form's requirements for loud vocal projection in open, unamplified settings likely favored male voices. Male voices, with higher average sound pressure levels (SPL), are better suited for the intense vocal demands needed to project over distances, aligning with the form's emphasis on *vācika abhinaya* (vocal expression) in the upper octave, a trait less naturally suited to the average female voice.
2. **Cultural and Social Context:** The challenging lifestyle of performers—traveling troupes staging overnight performances, minimal infrastructure, and strenuous demands—may have made it less attractive or feasible for women, especially given their roles and responsibilities in traditional rural settings.
3. **Alternative Contributions by Women:** Instead of participating directly in *Yakṣagāna* performances, women in historical Karnataka made substantial contributions as playwrights, poets, and patrons. Examples include figures like Queen *Gaṅgādevi* and Queen *Tirumalamba*, who composed significant literary works that have impacted Kannada theatre.

## Conclusion

Gender studies often interpret the traditional practice of women not taking part in the *Yakṣagāna* plays as “exclusion” of women due to orthodoxy. However, when this analyzes the historical trend and the latest evolved tradition, with social perspective, it can be said that the sociological study reveals logical reasons behind such exclusion and explains the recent

---

<sup>2</sup> (Book Release, *Dance Production and Madhura Vijaya- Yakshagana Performance with Research Approach* | Noopura Bhramari | ನೊಪುರ ಭ್ರಮರಿ, 2024)

inclusivity<sup>3</sup>. Gender role studies of Indian traditional arts require one have a perspective beyond the feminist prejudices.

This study concludes that traditional gender roles in *Yakṣagāna* were shaped by sociocultural beliefs, physiological factors, and the practical demands of outdoor, all-night performances. Historically, the loud vocal intensity required for *Yakṣagāna vācika* abhinaya suited the higher sound pressure levels of male voices, while challenging both the natural vocal range and social convenience for women. Consequently, many women contributed to *Yakṣagāna* as playwrights rather than performers.

Today, however, technological advancements such as sound amplification and proscenium stages have made these roles more accessible to women. The shift to shorter, auditorium-based performances, aided by support systems for daily routines, has enabled more women to participate as lead performers. Beyond mere shifts in social norms, this transformation reflects the impact of modern performance venues, digital reach, and evolving audience dynamics, encouraging broader female engagement in traditional South Indian theatre arts.

## APPENDIX

Women have been performing in lead roles in present times not only in *Yakṣagāna* but also in other traditional theatre forms of south India like Terukūttu. Having witnessed the exceptional talents of artists like Thilagavathi Palani, Manorama BN, and Ranjitha Yelluru on the proscenium stage, researcher observes the transformative contributions these artists have made to Terukūttu and *Yakṣagāna*. Thilagavathi Palani's performance at the Natyakala Conference 2022 (held from December 26th to December 31st, 2022, organized by Krishna Gana Sabha) highlighted a woman artist's pioneering spirit in bringing Terukūttu to wider audiences and stages beyond village settings. Similarly, performances of Tenkutittu *Yakṣagāna* adaptation based on the Madhura Vijayam, a Sanskrit poetic work by Gangadevi of the Vijayanagar era by the artists Manorama B.N. and Ranjitha Yelluru in the *Yakṣagāna* production Madhura Vijaya on January 13, 2024, at the Yuvapatha Auditorium, Yuvaka Sangha, Jayanagar, Bengaluru beautifully demonstrated how female artists are embracing research oriented adaptations and bringing new perspectives to the theatre form with authenticity and skill, showcasing the evolving inclusivity of *Yakṣagāna* with the aid of sociological and technological transformations.

## REFERENCES

- Anantharaman, V. M. (Ed.). (2006). *Mallikamarutham*. Sarasvati Mahal Library.  
Ayyangar, S. K. (1919). *Sources of Vijayanagar History*. University of Madras.  
Balasubramanian, R. (2023, December 14). *First female Kattaikoothu artiste Thilagavathi Palani contemplates the future of the traditional art form*. The South First.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for examples of recent performances by women artists

<https://thesouthfirst.com/featured/first-female-kattaikoothu-artiste-thilagavathi-palani-contemplates-the-future-of-the-traditional-art-form/>

Bharadwaj, K. V. (2013). *Karnataka Yakshagana Kavicharitre*. Yakshagana Kendra.

Bhat, S. S. (2014). *Yakshagana Prasangapanchaka*. Yakshagana Kendra.

*Book release, Dance production and Madhura Vijaya- Yakshagana performance with research approach | Noopura Bhramari | ನೊಪುರ ಭ್ರಮರಿ*. (2024, January 9).

<https://www.noopurabhramari.com/book-release-dance-production-and-madhura-vijaya-yakshagana-performance-with-research-approach/>

*Contribution of laryngeal size to differences between male and female voice production | The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America | AIP Publishing*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 31, 2024, from <https://pubs.aip.org/asa/jasa/article-abstract/150/6/4511/995500/Contribution-of-laryngeal-size-to-differences?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

Karant, K. S. (2013). Yakshagana. *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, 47(1–4).

K.V., P., & Kumar, S. (2019). Modern Themes in Yakshagana: Experimentation and Relevance. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, 6(2), 395–401.

Pépiot, E. (2015). Voice, speech and gender: Male-female acoustic differences and cross-language variation in English and French speakers. *Corela*, HS-16. <https://doi.org/10.4000/corela.3783>

Raghavan, V. (2004). *Splendours of Indian Dance*. Dr V Raghavan Centre For Performing Arts (Regd.).

Ramakrishnaya, B. N. (2003). *Yakshagana Svabodhini* (2013th ed.). Yakshagana Kendra.