

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Folk Media for Agricultural Extension: A Study of Yakshagana - A South Indian Folk Theatre

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**Abstract:** Agricultural extension is an important prerequisite of agricultural development in developing countries like India. Studies have proved that folk media play a significant role in agricultural communication, especially in extension activities. The present paper examines the role of Yakshagana in agricultural extension from the perspective of Diffusion of Innovations. Yakshagana is a 500-year-old south Indian folk theatre, popular in the coastal districts of Karnataka. Because of its flexibility, Yakshagana is being used for disseminating different development messages for the past many years. Using an exploratory method, the present paper attempts to identify major milestones in using Yakshagana for agricultural extension. The changing role of Yakshagana in looking at the changing approaches to agriculture has also been examined.

**Keywords:** Agricultural extension, Development communication, Diffusion of innovations, Folk media, Folk theatre, Yakshagana.

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### Introduction

Agricultural extension is the application of scientific research and new knowledge to agricultural practices through farmer education. The goals of agricultural extension include transferring information from the global knowledge base and from local research to farmers, enabling them to clarify their own goals and possibilities, educating them on how to make better decisions, and stimulating desirable agricultural development [1].

Effective extension involves adequate and timely access by farmers to relevant advice, with appropriate incentives to adopt the new technology if it suits their socioeconomic and agro-ecological circumstances [2]. However, one of the most important aspects of agricultural extension is the kind of media, the extension practitioners use in their strategies. Traditional folk media have been considered powerful media of communication among rural mass and farmers. According to Chapke and Bhagat [3], folk media provide

Important tool in the process of motivating rural masses towards accepting social changes that are being introduced through various development agencies. The potentialities of folk media forms such as folk theatre, puppetry, storytelling, folk songs, folk dances, ballads, etc. in agricultural extension have been tried and proved in various developing countries at least for the past sixty years [3]. "Folk media are part of the rural social environment, and hence, credible sources of information to the people.

They have proved useful in generating grassroots participation and dialogue between the performers and the audience" [4]. Yakshagana is a prominent folk theatre of south India, highly popular in the coastal districts of Karnataka. A multi-dimensional folk theatre comprising of dance, music, spoken word, body language, stage techniques, costumes and makeup, Yakshagana is usually performed in the open-air throughout the night.

According to Ashton [5], “Of India's many folk-theatre forms, Yakshagana may be the most colorful, vigorous, and spirited” [5]. Yakshagana 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 [6].

The themes of Yakshagana performances are usually drawn from epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and other Indian mythologies. However, Yakshagana is such a flexible traditional art that it has been used for communicating various development messages related to environment, agriculture, health, rural development, family planning, literacy, etc.

### Review of Literature

The timeless traditional media present inexhaustible alternatives for experimentation in development communication [7]. In a study conducted in Singapore, Valbuena [8] revealed that folk media programme helped rural farmers improve strategies in the production, storage, preservation and even marketing of rice [8]. Van der Ban and Hawkins [1] have reported that in Java, shadow puppets were utilized to promote agricultural innovations. In Nigeria, the use of fertilizer and tractor was promoted through traditional folk songs [1].

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization has declared that the folk media in the form of popular singers and musicians have proven highly effective for focusing community attention on population issues [9]. According to Chiovoloni [10], for sustainable development of agriculture, there is a need for close collaboration between development agents and traditional and new rural communicators to revive or strengthen the traditional communication system for making optimal use of its interactive power to stimulate peoples' participation [10].

Several studies have taken place in India too. Chapke and Bhagat [11] conducted a study of *Tamasha, Bhajan, Kirtan, Dhandhar* and *Quawaly* in Nagpur district in Maharashtra and found that folk media could be systematically used for agricultural as well as rural development [11]. Chauhan [12] stated that policy makers involved in planning and implementation of research and extension activities of agricultural fields

should use the combinations of traditional and electronic extension methods make available rural agricultural libraries and facility of Internet at village level [12]. There have been some studies on the role of Yakshagana in development communication. Usharani [13] has noted that a Yakshagana titled '*Nisarga Sandhana*' was extremely successful in the entire state of Karnataka, which encouraged many Yakshagana troupes to come up with programmes on topics like AIDS, Union budget, Dunkel Draft etc [13].

In a quasi-experimental research, Madhyastha [14] has found that there was significant change in the awareness level of the respondents regarding AIDS after watching Yakshagana on AIDS awareness [14]. D'Silva et. al [15] while examining the global health problem of HIV/AIDS from intercultural communication perspectives, has noted that Yakshagana was pivotal in creating awareness of the disease among a previously ill-informed audience [15].

Kumar [16] has reported that Yakshagana has been used to disseminate messages related to family planning, environmental awareness, literacy, awareness on diseases like AIDS, cancer, chikungunya and leprosy, health and sanitation, small savings, budget, communal harmony, anti-dowry, untouchability, breast feeding, protection of female child, food and nutrition, iodine, malaria, monkey disease, irrigation, self-help, new economic policy, etc [16].

There have been no studies into the role of Yakshagana in extension communication, though it has been a major folk media of Karnataka for centuries. The present paper, adopting an exploratory approach, has tried to examine the role of Yakshagana in agricultural extension, from the perspective of Diffusion of Innovations.

### Agriculture and Yakshagana

Yakshagana is part and parcel of Karnataka, especially of four districts i.e., Dakshina Kannada, Udupi, Uttara Kannada and Shimoga, and Kasargod of Kerala. It has a known history of at least 500 years. The art has two geographical variants- *moodalapaya* (eastern style called *Dodddata*-major play, Northern Karnataka), and *paduwalapaya* (western style- also known as coastal yakshagana). Paduwalapaya Yakshagana has another variant called '*Tala Maddale*' a text-

centered performance with no stage-action, dance and make-up, but focusing instead on the sung verses and spoken dialogues [6]. Both agriculture and Yakshagana are the integral part of the life of coastal districts in Karnataka. Agriculture has been the main occupation of the region for a long period, though there may have been shifts in sources of income, of late. Farmers in the coastal belt had no sources of entertainment and social education other than Yakshagana before the emergence of modern mass media. They had to depend on folk media like Yakshagana to come out of the monotony and routine pressures.

They could find some Yakshagana performance somewhere in their village or in neighbouring villages almost every day. Yakshagana has been a channel of informal education for the masses, and it has been aptly referred as an Open University [17]. Yakshagana has its base on epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and various puranas, which are rich in noble values. Every *prasanga* (episode; play-text in the form of poetry) based on these mythologies propagate morality and ethics, and have a deeper impact on the audiences in one way or other.

Generations have been influenced by the speech, music, colour and vibrancy of Yakshagana so deeply that the natives of the region have a psychological bond with the art and the artistes. The uniqueness of Yakshagana lies in its ability to respond to the contemporary needs. From economic progress of the country to the creation of awareness against epidemics, Yakshagana has responded to the contemporary developments of the society from time to time.

Different government agencies like the Song and Drama Division, the Directorate of Field Publicity, etc. have adopted different folk media for communicating development communication, while folk artistes too have participated in such missions voluntarily. Yakshagana has been one such art form.

### Grow More Food (GMF) Campaign

Rapid agricultural development in order to achieve food self-sufficiency in the shortest possible time was among the immediate priority of India in the post-independent scenario [18].

India got independence at a crucial juncture, when the country was facing a number of grave problems. The outbreak of the Second World War (1939-45) put severe strain on India's food economy, in part because the war cut India off from the world food markets on which it had become dependent [19]. In addition to this, there was Great Bengal Famine of 1943, in which as many as 4 million people died of starvation [20]. India experienced a food crisis that enveloped the country in the first five years after independence. The grain bowls of West Punjab and East Bengal went to Pakistan as a result of Partition. The situation was aggravated further by mass-exodus of people from across the boarder.

The situation compelled the government of India to initiate 'Grow More Food Campaign' in 1948. Arrangements were made for integration and co-ordination of the entire campaign for increasing agricultural production. Agricultural departments of state governments were assigned the responsibility of implementing this campaign. Some state governments associated the public with working of the campaign by setting up non-official committees at the village, taluk, district and state levels.

The plans were revised from time to time to make the campaign more effective. The Grow More Food campaign (1943-51) was replaced by the First Five Year Plan (1951-56), and its primary emphasis was on agriculture and food production.

### Yakshagana and GMF

Yakshagana played a significant role in disseminating the objectives of Grow More Food and other schemes of agricultural development of the government in coastal Karnataka in 1950s and 1960s. National Extension Service (NES), a rural development initiative launched by the Government of India in 1953, conducted a Yakshagana *Talamaddale* competition in Dakshina Kannada district in order to encourage Yakshagana authors to come up with new *prasangas* dealing with agricultural development.

Several *prasangas* on agricultural development were composed and performed during this period. *Nellura Gella*, *Japanese Krishi Vijaya*, *Rashtra Vijaya*, *Krishi Vijaya*,

*Krishi Mahime, Grow More Food*, etc. were some of the Yakshagana *prasangas* composed with the central theme of agricultural development.

### **Nellura Gella (1958)**

'*Nellura Gella*' (literally means 'victory of a village of paddy') of Kolambe Puttanna Gowda can be considered one of the pioneering attempts in this connection. Gowda, who was a teacher, writer and farmer from Chokkadi in Sullia taluk of Karnataka, composed this *prasanga* in 1958. The purpose of the author was "to publicize the message of increased food production by using the medium of Yakshagana" [21].

Though the *prasanga* was on a contemporary theme, Damle [21] points out, that the author had tried to accommodate its message in the traditional style of Yakshagana by brining characters like Dhanyadevi (Goddess of grains) and Narada. To summarize the plot of *Nellura Gella*: farmers spend their time in worshipping Dhanyadevi, while the Goddess appears and advises them "to minimize worship and maximize work" [21].

Meanwhile Narada meets the farmers and educates them regarding chemical fertilizers, improved seeds, and advanced farm equipments in order to achieve increased food production. The farmers also get organized and achieve good results. This worries Daridryaraja (the king of poverty), who asks his followers, the 'fool' and the 'idler' to mingle with farmers and make them to turn away from their works.

He also sends pests to spoil the crops. Finally, Dhanyadevi intervenes, defeats Daridryaraja and his team and provides solace to farmers. The *prasanga* is a well-structured idea to convey the need for agricultural development as intended by the Grow More Food campaign and the First Five Year Plan.

### **Japani Krishi Vijaya (1959)**

Manila Shivashankara Shatri from Punacha in Bantwal taluk of Karnataka, composed '*Japani Krishi Vijaya*' (literally means 'victory of Japanese farming technique') in 1959. Shatri was a teacher by profession. The *prasanga* "bagged gold medal in the *talamaddale* competition conducted by the Puttur Division of the National Extension

Service in 1959 to publicize the Grow More Food campaign".

The *prasanga* was published along with interpretations in 1960. It was performed at various places in coastal and *Malenad* areas in the early 1960s. As the title indicates, the *prasanga* intended to popularize the Japanese farming technique, which was a part of the agricultural extension activities of the period. According to Rao [22], "The *prasanga* highlights the food crisis in the country, appealing people to try their level best to solve the same. It denotes that people should make use of the timely assistance of the government." The "imaginary plot" depicted how a *gram sevak* (village servant) convinced the village head as well as the farmers to adopt the Japanese farming method, and how "the food crisis of the country was solved with the four-fold increase in food production" [22].

The *gram sevak*, in the plot, explains the modern agricultural techniques such Japanese method of implantation, use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and intercultivator. He also suggests ways of borrowing loans from cooperative societies. The landlord opposes the new initiatives in the beginning but gets convinced about them once he witnesses the results, and instructs all other tenants to follow the method from the next season.

### **Rashtra Vijaya (1961)**

'*Rashtra Vijaya*' (literally means 'victory of the nation') is a similar *prasanga*, composed by Seethanadi Ganapaiah Shetty in 1961. Shetty, a renowned Yakshagana author, is from a place called Seethanadi near Hebri in Karkala taluk of Karnataka. He has composed about 56 *prasangas* in Kannada and Tulu languages related to different themes. *Rashtra Vijaya* too secured cash prize from Government of India for its innovation and excellence during 1960s.

It does not focus only on agriculture and industrialization, but also speaks about eradication of poverty, corruption, class and caste differences in society, black market, gambling, and alcoholism. The *prasanga* presents these issues through the events taking place in the kingdom of one Dharmapalaka, the king of Sourashtra.

The king comes to know about the problems prevailing in his state and implements various development projects with the help of his minister Subuddhi.

The author of the *prasanga* has also provided dialogues along with the verses, in order to help artistes to communicate the messages better. The *prasanga* clearly reflects the objectives of the first two Five Year Plans, where the plot emphasizes increased agricultural production, which necessitates irrigation projects, construction of dams, power generation, crop loans to farmers, etc. It portrays the picture of a welfare state as a result of agricultural development and industrialization [22].

### Krishi Vijaya (1960s)

'*Krishi Vijaya*' (literally means 'victory of agriculture') of V. Rama Rao Siddayyakodi belongs to the same series of *prasangas*. Rama Rao was a teacher from Bantwal taluk in Karnataka. The plot of '*Krishi Vijaya*' advises farmers to concentrate on agricultural development and suggests measures to be taken against the plant diseases and pests. '*Krishi Vijaya*' presents the story of a depressed farmer who has lost interest in farming due to the loss he incurred.

The plant diseases are depicted as demons in the plot. The *gram sevak* suggests the farmer measures to be taken against these 'demons' and steps to improve agriculture. Motivated by the *gram sevak*, the farmer concentrates on agriculture with improved farming techniques and achieves prosperity. The farmer in the *prasanga* represents the agricultural community of the country.

### Other Efforts

Several other attempts have also been done in Yakshagana with the intension of agricultural extension. Ambemule Govinda Bhat, a farmer and homoeopathy medicine practitioner from Kasaragod district, Kerala, has composed a *prasanga* titled 'Grow More Food' which directly deals with the intentions of the GMF scheme. N. Narayana Shetty, a scholar of poetics, from Mangalore has written a *prasanga* titled, again, '*Krishi Vijaya*' (victory of agriculture).

N. N. Madhyasatha, a teacher and a Yakshagana artiste, from Kasargod district, came up with another *prasanga* with the

same objective, titled '*Krishi Mahime*' (meaning 'greatness of agriculture'). There was also one more attempt by K. Gopalakrishna Bhat Kaikamba titled '*Raitana Baduku*' (meaning life of a farmer).

### Madhupa Mahatme (1980)

'*Madhupa Mahatme*' (meaning 'greatness of honeybees') is a different one in respect of its theme, compared to the previously discussed *prasangas*. An episode promoting beekeeping, it was written by agriculturist and artist Harikrishna Bhat Artyadka in 1980. The *prasanga* highlights the advantages of honey, the procedure of proper beekeeping, and the measures to protect honeybees through a story. As per the *prasanga*: Long back, Queen Bee, created by Brahma, descends to Earth and develops her family on the foothills of Shivagiri.

Finding medicinal uses in honey, Chandra, a human, fosters honeybees and popularizes beekeeping. The bee-family faces threats from Pipeelikasura ('ant' referred as demon) and Kanajasura ('wasp' referred as demon). Finally, they overcome all the threats, expand the family and lead a happy life.

### Effects of Modern Agriculture and Yakshagana

Development communication is not only about promoting positive changes, but also about criticizing the negative aspects. Yakshagana has looked at the other side of the modernization of agriculture too. Yakshagana authors have responded to the contemporary developments in the field of agriculture and composed *prasangas* highlighting the ill-effects of over-mechanization. The following section analyses two such *prasangas*.

### Savayava Vijaya (2010)

*Savayava Vijaya* (meaning victory of organic farming) by artist and academician Bhaskar Rai Kukkuvalli from Mangalore was composed in 2010. As the title indicates, the *prasanga* highlights the significance of organic farming and points at the ill-effects of modern agricultural approaches.

To summarize the plot: a person suffering from various diseases approaches his king and seeks solutions to his misery. After consultation with his minister, the king understands that the diseases are due to the

troubles caused by one demon (personifying increased use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and insecticides). Savayava Kumara, son of the minister, wages a war against the demon and provides solace to the citizens by killing him. In an interview with these authors, Bhaskar Rai Kukkuvali said, the *prasanga* was specially prepared for broadcasting in 'Krishi Ranga' programme of All India Radio, Mangalore. Renowned Yakshagana artistes Padyana Ganapathi Bhat (*Bhagavata*- the singer), Siddakatte Chennappa Shetty (Savayava Kumara), Kumble Sundar Rao (the king), M. Prabhakar Joshi (the demon) and Bhaskar Rai Kukkuvali (the minister) had participated in the Yakshagana *talamaddale*. The 30-minute-episode spoke about environmental protection, increasing immunity in people, apart from propagating the 'organic mission'.

### Krishi Vijaya (2011)

Agriculturist and teacher M. T. Shanthimoole from Sullia taluk of Karnataka wrote a Yakshagana '*Krishi Vijaya*' in 2011. This *Krishi Vijaya* was different in its content from that of the *prasangas* produced in 1950s and 60s with the same title. If the episodes written during the Grow More Food campaign dealt with acceleration of food production with modern techniques, the new one highlighted their demerits and promoted the need for organic farming.

The *prasanga* opens up with Narada meeting Bharatha Muni, a sage advocating of organic farming. Narada explains the disappointing state of agriculture, worsened with the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Bharatha Muni decides to provide a solution to the situation and creates a model of organic farming on the foothills of Malayachala with his disciples.

On the other hand, Mahiketana, the advocate of modern agriculture continues his method and ridicules organic farming. Some farmers blindly follow his approach and end up in failure and disappointment. Eventually, farmers are convinced with the advantages of organic farming and decide to adopt the same. As the authors writes, "the *prasanga* intends to highlight the negative side of the modern agriculture propagated in the name of Green Revolution." He says he aspires to motivate the ordinary farmers who are depressed with the failures of modern

approaches, which has converted farming into an industry [23].

### Discussion

The *prasangas* presented above can be broadly classified into two categories- *prasangas* with mythological background and *prasangas* with social background – though all of them belong to a single category called 'imaginary *prasangas*'. The first category uses a storyline similar to that of mythology, where characters such as god, sage, king, minister, demon, etc are used. The second category adopts the modern characters such as landlord, farmer, *gram sevak*, social worker, etc. *Nellura Gella*, *Rashtra Vijaya*, *Savayava Vijaya*, *Krishi Vijaya* (of M.T. Shanthimoole), and *Madhupa Mahatme* belong to the first category, while *Japani Krishi Vijaya* and *Krishi Vijaya* (of Rama Rao ) belong to the second category.

Though all the *prasangas* have a single broad intention, i.e. agricultural extension, this categorization is important to examine their effectiveness. Studies have revealed that Yakshagana can be used for awareness purpose, but audiences have always felt that Yakshagana with mythological framework will be more effective [16, 24]. Yakshagana is basically an art form used to narrate mythological stories. Non-mythological *prasangas* gained popularity only after 1950s.

Therefore, it is natural that the traditional viewers of Yakshagana are pleased to watch Yakshagana with mythological framework. This is true specifically for Yakshagana *bayalata* because, this is a performance necessitating characters acting on stage with specific costumes, make-up and language. Characters like Dharmapalaka or Subuddhi in *Rashtra Vijaya*, Dhanyadevi, Narada or Daridryaraja in *Nellura Gella*, king, minister, demon or Savayava Kumara in *Savayava Vijaya* can be brought on stage with costumes which fit to the tradition of Yakshagana.

They will be more "acceptable" to the audience. Whereas, characters like *gram sevak*, social worker, landlord, farmer, etc. may not fit to the costumes of traditional Yakshagana. However, this limitation is minimal in *talamaddale*, which too has much potentiality to communicate intended message to the audience.

The *prasangas* discussed above can also be classified into two more categories, i.e. *prasangas* supporting modern agriculture and *prasangas* supporting organic farming. *Prasangas* composed during the period of Grow More Good campaign like *Nellura Gella*, *Rashtra Vijaya*, *Japani Krishi Vijaya* are more concerned about modern agricultural techniques, while those written in the new millennium like *Savayava Vijaya* or *Krishi Vijaya* (of M T Shanthimoolle) support organic farming. Which method of farming is better-is not a topic of discussion here.

The point to be noted is that Yakshagana as a responsible art has responded to the contemporary needs. As mentioned earlier, the initial decades of independence demanded massive food production since the country was suffering from food crisis, and therefore, the administrators thought of adopting modern agricultural techniques, for which extension communication was a key requirement.

It was natural that Yakshagana as a traditional folk media supported the government's policy and became a part of the mission. A different thought process emerged in the country after 1980s with environmental movements making a strong presence. People started becoming aware of the other side of modern farming and Green Revolution. *Savayava Vijaya* or *Krishi Vijaya* are representatives of this thought. An important feature of most of the Yakshagana *prasangas* here is that the use of opinion leaders.

The idea of opinion leaders was developed by Katz [25] and was effectively applied by Rogers [26] in his concept of Diffusion of Innovations [25, 26]. Opinion leaders have a greater role to play in extension

communication too, where they are called extension agents or field officers. It is important to note that the Yakshagana authors have brought the idea of opinion leaders. The *gram sevak* of *Japani Krishi Vijaya* and *Krishi Vijaya* (of Rama Rao), Subuddhi in *Rashtra Vijaya*, Narada in *Nellura Gella*, Bharata Muni in *Krishi Vijaya* (of M. T. Shanthimule) are good examples of opinion leaders. The audience can easily relate the role played by the extension officers in the real life, which will certainly be a support to the extension officers in their act of agricultural extension.

## Conclusion

Many scholars and artistes have argued that any living art like Yakshagana should not be restricted to mere entertainment. As Joshi [27] said, "Any art that does not accept contemporary influences will be more dead than alive" [27]. In the words of Someshwara [28], "A live art having mobility cannot live in past without having an idea about present and future. In case it continues the old habit, such an art becomes reactionary and anti-progressive. It loses its meaningful link with the presence" [28]. Yakshagana has made the maximum use of its flexibility and responded to the contemporary issues.

Its role in agricultural extension is an instance to this. Any social transformation does not take place instantly; rather it is a gradual process. Yakshagana as a traditional folk theatre does not cause changes all of a sudden because it works at a deeper psychological level. Yakshagana *prasangas* can create a congenial environment, an important prerequisite of extension. However, those who use such traditional arts in development communication should take sufficient care to see that their originality is not harmed.

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