



Ini Periodi

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Getting ready to go for an all-night Yakshagana* performance is one of the fondest memories of my childhood. There was nothing like waiting for a Yakshagana performance those days. Everything was a celebration, from the anticipation to going, then watching the artistes get ready in the Chowki* absolutely stunned, and getting lost in the world of wonders. I would watch the entire performance; mesmerised, praying the night would never get over. I have even cried several times after the performance, unwilling to come back to reality that was so boring and plain in comparison.

Yakshagana as an art form has played different roles at different stages in my life. As a child it opened a new world to me, a world that consisted of colours, richness, characters and emotions. I would sit through the Ekalavya Prasanga* weeping and crying at the injustice of the world. I was probably one of the luckier children to have an atmosphere at home where I could discuss what I saw and what I felt. And these stories churned up questions within me, they made me think, wonder and ponder about various issues and aspects of life in whatever innocent way I could. Of course my mother was always there to answer my queries and trigger more questions. I would ask my mother very seriously “Amma, If Rama was good, how can he treat Shurpanaka so badly and send Seetha to the forest? What is the difference between Rama and Ravana then?” We would

talk about how it was impossible for any person to remain either good or bad. We would discuss then, what I now call, shades of personalities, or converse vaguely about human desires and conflicts, at its most basic level.

My mother was starting a cultural organisation in our village which was to conduct weekly Yakshagana classes. Here was an opportunity for me to be close to something that I had always watched from distance. After attending the first class, I never looked back. Thus began my new journey with Yakshagana.

Yakshagana played the most significant role in my life during my early years of adolescence. I was becoming less and less comfortable with my own body and appearance, even though I was in an environment where growing up wasn't looked at as something to be ashamed of. I was becoming more and more conscious physically. Yakshagana gave me a sense of freedom that I am extremely thankful about. My body as well as some aspects of my personality became free as I progressed in Yakshagana. I was able to stand straight, head up, no longer conscious of my body and my changing self. The basic posture of Yakshagana demanded confidence, freeness, and self-assuredness; if one wanted to really learn the art form, one had to let go of all the other bodily constraints. It's almost ironic that an art form that is considered solely patriarchal (even today, it's rare to see



women performing this art form) should have such an impact on us, girls. I personally found the experience of learning it liberating and I'm sure many girls who were learning it with me felt the same.

A strong performer in our group plays the role of a demon. And women were thought to be incapable of doing justice to these roles because the costume itself was extremely heavy to carry. We can't help smiling even today when the whole audience gasped in surprise at hearing a woman's voice, after an elaborate introductory dance. "Oh gosh, that's a woman!" was what they all would say. On the other hand it was hard to watch so many talented artistes discontinuing simply because they were girls. Their families would force them to drop out, making us feel extremely depressed. It is difficult to find the perfect combination of talent, hard work and interest – like every other art form.

If watching was mesmerising, performing was almost hypnotic. Getting ready for the performance, the practice, putting on the elaborate make up or heavy costume, getting on to the stage, letting ourselves get lost and finally the high or even the low you experience after the performance were all equally thrilling. I learnt to cherish success, accept failure, and welcome feedback gracefully.

Being part of a Yakshagana troupe made me understand the concept of teamwork at a very practical level. Like one of my most favourite Yakshagana artistes explained "If Krishna is to appear as a protector, Draupadi needs to relate with him in a particular way highlighting some qualities that will make him a protector." Where you stand on the stage, how you carry yourself in front of another character, how you dance, speak and the words you use... everything needs to be in synch with who you are on stage and who are you relating with. Nothing then is individual. You only become a small part of a larger picture that you along with everyone else are trying to present to the audience and this insight is what makes



us all humble.

My journey with Yakshagana hasn't always been smooth. The most challenging part was when I was required to speak or give a message that was against my values or when I was asked to be part of a story line I didn't respect. I have asked myself several times why I was part of a prasanga called Tulsi-Jalandar which spoke about a woman's virtues and chastity in a way that made every inch of my body uncomfortable. What was I to do at that point? Is it more necessary to be committed to the art form that you loved very much? Or, give up on it simply because some element of it contradicted your values and beliefs? Or did we have the freedom to stay within the framework of this art form and not include aspects that we were not happy with? These were some of the questions we faced as a team.

I called myself not religious or part of any caste. What was I doing then, acting out stories and sec-



tions of epics that were so important to a particular religion? I had to figure these answers for myself. Studying a paper, as part of my course called Perspectives in Arts, consolidated so many of these thoughts for me. It made me revisit these questions which were left only partly or vaguely answered. My teacher explained beautifully how a true artiste treats these stories as universal human emotions that everyone could connect with and attempts to make it accessible to everyone who's watching it.

There were other questions to deal with as well and we dwelled upon these questions together: sometime we were lucky enough to be able to think in the company of some scholars. Was there a need for a reformation of this art form when it came to children taking part in it? What kinds of stories would be appropriate for children to enjoy? Was it okay to experiment or was there a desperate need to stick by the rigid rules of this art form in order to preserve its beauty? None of these questions or doubts made me distance myself from the art form; in fact they only strengthened my bond with it.

There are some troupes which use this art form mainly to preach about their religious beliefs, culture and a way of living that they want to impose on people. It is unfortunate that many people associate this art form only with religion. There are some who

stay committed to the art form and make it their lives. I personally do not have big dreams or expectations from it; I hope to stay connected with it and continue to learn, think, grow and be part experiences that are so enchanting.

Yakshagana, probably like any other art form, has a great potential. It can contribute to both physical and psychological wellbeing of a person if you cultivate a healthy relationship with it. We as a team have tried to constantly exercise our relationship with it; through learning and attempting new things. We have developed a new prasanga called 'Madhura Manikya' introducing new gender perspectives in Yakshagana. It raises questions about gender discriminations and breaks stereotypes in the most unassuming manner. After working on this story for a whole week, under the guidance of some extremely renowned Yakshagana artistes, we performed this 'women oriented theme' in a temple in a small town near Mangalore with trepidations about audience reaction.

And when the audience stayed on till the end we knew that we were on the right path!

*Yakshagana : a vibrant folk art form of coastal Karnataka with dance, drama, music, elaborate costumes and make up, extempore dialogues and episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharatha.

Chowki: Green room of Yakshagana

Prasanga: Episodes or stories to be performed in Yakshagana

Ini Periodi graduated from Centre For Learning in 2011 after finishing her A-levels. She is currently pursuing B.A. in Communication Studies at Mount Carmel College, Bangalore. She likes to keep herself busy with a diverse set of interests - languages, local tradition and culture. She enjoys working with children, being close to nature and being constantly involved with the performing arts in some way or the other. She can be contacted at uvperiodi@gmail.com