

CHALLENGES IN DOCUMENTING THE LEGACY OF YAKṢAGĀNA ARTIST V.M. JOSHI

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Abstract

This paper examines the life and artistic contributions of Sri Vighneshwar Mahabaleshwar Joshi (1916–1983), widely known as "Actor Joshi," a prominent figure in the traditional Indian theater form, Yakṣagāna. With a career spanning thirty-five years, Joshi's early immersion in Vedic studies and interactions with scholars in Gōkarṇa significantly influenced his development as a distinguished Vāgmī (orator) in Yakṣagāna performances. Beginning his theatrical journey at the age of 11 with the Ishashraya Nataka Company, he later collaborated with esteemed drama troupes, including Garuda Sadāshivaraya Nātaka Company, Gubbi Veeranna, Shastri Company, and the Sāhitya Sevaka Sangha of Gōkarṇa. Under the mentorship of renowned artists such as Moodkani Narayana Hegde, Murur Devaru Hegde, and Keremane Shivaram Hegde, Joshi mastered the fundamentals of Yakṣagāna, particularly the Baḍā Baḍagu style, emphasizing adherence to śāstrīyate (classical rigor). His unique approach to dance, characterized by original choreography and personalized makeup for each character, set him apart in both strī vēśa (female roles) and puruṣa vēśa (male roles). Joshi's performances were marked by a clear distinction between Mātu (dialogues) and Naṭane (acting), achieving remarkable coordination between nṛtta (pure dance) and bhāva (expression). Throughout his career, he portrayed approximately 28 vēśa-s (roles) across various meḷa-s (troupes) and established his own troupe, the Sri Bhadrakālī Kṛpāpoṣita Yakṣagāna Maṇḍali in Gōkarṇa. Despite his significant contributions, there is a notable lack of documentation, posing challenges to preserving and studying his legacy. This paper aims to explore Joshi's artistic innovations, character portrayals, and the obstacles faced in chronicling his impact on Yakṣagāna.

Keywords: Yakṣagāna, Actor Joshi, Baḍā Baḍagu style, Vāgmī, traditional Indian theater, Gōkarṇa.

Introduction:

Sri Vighneshwar Mahabaleshwar Joshi (1916-1983), widely recognized as "Actor Joshi," was a distinguished figure in the realm of Yakṣagāṇa, a traditional theater form of Karnāṭaka. His extensive 35-year career in Yakṣagāṇa was profoundly influenced by his early immersion in Vedic studies (Vedādhyaṇa), interactions with scholars, and engagement with Purāṇa Śravaṇa in the Vaidika Kṣetra of Gōkarṇa. These formative experiences cultivated his eloquence and deepened his understanding of the art form.

Joshi's theatrical journey commenced at the tender age of 11 or 12 when he joined the Isāśraya Nāṭaka Company. His passion for drama led him to collaborate with several esteemed drama companies, including Garuḍa Sadāśivarāya Nāṭaka Company, Gubbi Vīraṇṇa, Śāstri Company, and the Sāhitya Sevaka Saṅgha of Gōkarṇa. Upon returning to Gōkarṇa, his paternal uncle, Kamehwar Maskeri, introduced him to the world of Yakṣagāṇa. Under the mentorship of renowned artists such as Moodkani Narayana Hegde, Murur Devaru Hegde, and Keremane Shivaram Hegde, Joshi honed the foundational aspects of Yakṣagāṇa.

Embracing the Baḍā Baḍagu style, Joshi adhered strictly to its śāstrīyate, ensuring that his performances remained within the prescribed boundaries. He emphasized controlled hand movements, advocating that gestures should not extend beyond the body's frame. Joshi developed a unique dance style, distinct for both strī vēśa-s (female roles) and puruṣa vēśa-s (male roles), consciously avoiding imitation. His meticulous approach extended to makeup, where he personally crafted distinct appearances for each character he portrayed (Havgodī).

Beyond performance, Joshi contributed to the Teṅku tiṭṭu prasanga artha dārike, engaging in interpretative aspects even when not participating in the dance. Throughout his illustrious career, he enacted approximately 28 vēśa-s across various meḷa-s, including Iḍaguṇji, Koṇḍāduḷi, Karki, Murur, Amṛtēśvari, and Gōkarṇa. He also established his own troupe, the Śrī Bhadrakālī Kṛpāpoṣita Yakṣagāṇa Maṇḍali, in Gōkarṇa. Joshi's performances were characterized by a clear distinction between dialogue delivery (Mātu) and acting (Naṭane), with a harmonious integration (samanvaya) of dance (nṛtta) and expression (bhāva) (Havgodī). His adeptness at portraying contrasting emotions stood as a testament to his mastery in Yakṣagāṇa.

Sri Vighneshwar Mahabaleshwar Joshi received several prestigious accolades in recognition of his significant contributions to Yakṣagāna and Kannada theatre. In 1979, he was honored by the Viśva Hindu Pariṣad, Gōkarṇa for his dedication to preserving and promoting Yakṣagāna. Subsequently, in the 1980–81 period, he was awarded the Janapada Academy Praśasti, acknowledging his excellence in folk theatre and his impact on Karnāṭaka's cultural heritage. In 1981, the Kannada and Sanskriti Ilākhe granted him a Māsāśana, a monthly stipend, in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the field of Yakṣagāna (Award Letter, 24 Aug. 1981).

Despite his significant contributions, there exists a paucity of comprehensive documentation on Joshi's work, posing challenges to preserving and studying his legacy. This paper aims to delve into his artistic innovations, character portrayals, and the obstacles encountered in chronicling his impact on Yakṣagāna.

Review of Literature:

There is no dedicated article that specifically focuses on his achievements.

Methodology:

To comprehensively explore the artistic contributions and legacy of Sri Vighneshwar Mahabaleshwar Joshi (VM Joshi) within the Yakṣagāna tradition, this study employs a qualitative research approach centered on oral history and ethnographic methods. The primary data collection methods include:

In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection because they allow for both consistency in addressing key themes and flexibility to explore individual insights. A diverse group of respondents was selected to provide a comprehensive perspective on VM Joshi's contributions:

Veteran Yakṣagāna artists who collaborated with or were contemporaries of VM Joshi

- Sri Anant Havgodī

Scholars specializing in Yakṣagāna and related performing arts

- Dr. G. L. Hegde
- Sri Keremane Shivanand Hegde
- Sri Mahabalmoorti Kodlekere
- Sri Shridhar Adi

Students and protégés mentored by VM Joshi

- Sri Nagaraj Kurse

Audience members and community elders who witnessed his performances firsthand

- Ved. Gajanana Hirebhat
- Sri Neelkanth Hirebhat
- Sri Jayant Kaikini
- Sri Ramakrishna Gayatri
- Sri Gopalkrishna Gayatri

These interviews aim to elicit detailed narratives and personal reflections on VM Joshi's performance style, pedagogical methods, and his influence on the Yakṣagāna tradition.

Archival Research: Reviewing existing literature, photographs, and program notes related to VM Joshi's career. This includes materials from local archives, cultural institutions, and

private

collections.

Analysis, Results & Discussion:

Characters Portrayed by VM Joshi

Throughout his illustrious career in Yakṣagāna, VM Joshi demonstrated exceptional versatility and depth in his character portrayals. His performances spanned a wide array of roles, encompassing both heroic and villainous figures, as well as divine and human characters. Notable portrayals include:

- Kirāta in Śabarārjuna
- Ekalavya in Bhīṣma Vijaya
- Vatsa in Ratnāvati Kalyāṇa
- Kulinda and Duṣṭabuddhi in Candrahāsa
- Akrūra and Kamsa in Kamsavadhe
- Vidura in Kṛṣṇa Sandhāna
- Uttara in Gograhaṇa
- Jāmbavanta in Cavatiya Candra (Jambavati Kalyāṇa)
- Kuruba Kāla in Kālidāsa
- Vāsanti in Yakṣaloka Vijaya

- Śani and Ṛtuparṇa in Naḷa Damayanti
- Yama in Satiśakti
- Nakṣatrika and Vīrabāhu in Hariscandra
- Rāvaṇa and Śiva in Bhu Kailāsa
- Kṛṣṇa and Narakāśura in Narakāśura Kālaga
- Muduki in Rāja Rudrakopa
- Sudhanva in Sudhanvārjuna
- Babruvāhana in Babruvāhana Kālaga
- Dharmarāja in Gadāyuddha
- Vīrasairandhrī in Kīcaka Vadhe
- Māruti and Balarāma in Māruti Pratāpa

1. VM Joshi's Portrayal of Akrūra in Kamsavadhe

Sri V.M.Joshi's depiction of Akrūra in the Yakṣagāna play Kamsavadhe stands as a testament to his profound understanding of character embodiment and his mastery of expressive techniques. Through meticulous physical expressions and emotive gestures, Joshi conveyed the depth of Akrūra's devotion and internal conflict.

● Depiction of Bhakti Through Physical Expression

Joshi utilized Āṅgika Abhinaya to portray Akrūra's unwavering devotion (bhakti) towards Lord Kṛṣṇa. His entrance into Vṛndāvana was marked by a palpable shift in demeanor, capturing the character's reverence and emotional turmoil. The nuanced gestures and controlled movements illustrated Akrūra's inner transformation upon nearing the sacred land associated with Kṛṣṇa.

- **Hesitation to Step on Sacred Ground**

A poignant moment in Joshi's performance was Akrūra's hesitation to set foot on Vṛndāvana's soil. This deliberate pause symbolized Akrūra's profound sense of unworthiness and deep reverence for the land sanctified by Kṛṣṇa's presence. Such a portrayal emphasized the character's humility and the sanctity of the setting.

- **Dramatic Leap and Rolling on the Ground**

In a powerful display of devotion, Joshi had Akrūra leap from the Ratha (chariot) and prostrate himself on the ground, rolling in the dust of Vṛndāvana. This act served multiple symbolic purposes:

- **Complete Surrender:** Demonstrating Akrūra's total submission to Kṛṣṇa's divinity.
- **Physical Union with the Sacred:** Expressing a desire to be enveloped by the holiness of the land.
- **Emotional Catharsis:** Releasing the overwhelming joy and reverence felt upon entering Kṛṣṇa's abode.

Joshi's embodiment of these emotions through physicality provided audiences with a visceral experience of Akrūra's spiritual journey.

2. VM Joshi's Portrayal of Kālidāsa in Kālidāsa Caritre

The Kālidāsa Caritre Prasaṅga, penned by Khadatoka Manjunatha Bhagawat, was specifically crafted to showcase the talents of VM Joshi as Kālidāsa and Chittani Ramachandra Hegde as Kalādhara. This collaboration brought forth a unique theatrical experience in the realm of Yakṣagāna.

- **Innovative Use of Stage Props**

VM Joshi introduced a novel element to the Yakṣagāna stage by incorporating a large branch of a live mango tree as a prop. This realistic addition enhanced the visual narrative, particularly in scenes depicting Kāḷidāsa's transformation, and underscored Joshi's commitment to bringing authenticity to his performances.

- **Depiction of Foolishness Through Āṅgika Abhinaya**

To portray Kāḷa's naivety, Joshi employed expressive body movements. A notable instance was when Kāḷa sat on the very branch he was cutting, a classic representation of folly. Joshi's physical expressions in this scene not only elicited humor but also highlighted the character's lack of awareness, setting the stage for his eventual enlightenment.

- **Linguistic Transition Signifying Transformation**

A pivotal moment in the performance was the transition of Kāḷa to the enlightened Kāḷidāsa, marked by the goddess Kālī writing on his tongue. Joshi adeptly signified this transformation by shifting his dialogues from Kannada to Saṃskṛta. This linguistic change symbolized the character's intellectual and spiritual elevation, emphasizing the profound impact of divine intervention.

Through these innovative techniques, VM Joshi's portrayal of Kāḷidāsa not only captivated audiences but also set a benchmark for character interpretation in Yakṣagāna.

3. VM Joshi's Portrayal of Kulinda in *Ratnāvati Kalyāṇa*

In the Yakṣagāna play *Ratnāvati Kalyāṇa*, VM Joshi's depiction of Kulinda, a seemingly minor character, emerged as a standout performance, showcasing his ability to elevate supporting roles through innovative theatrical techniques.

Character Significance

Kulinda, a Kirāta (tribal leader), plays a crucial role by rescuing and nurturing the abandoned child Candrahāsa, ensuring his survival and eventual ascension to kingship. Joshi's intense portrayal brought depth and prominence to this character, making Kulinda a highlight of the *Prasaṅga*.

Theatrical Innovations

- **Distinctive Costume Choice:** Departing from traditional attire, Joshi adorned Kulinda with two angularly placed *pogaḍes* (headpieces), creating a visually striking and unique appearance. This innovative styling reinforced the character's tribal identity and distinguished him on stage.
- **Āṅika Abhinaya:** Joshi's dynamic body language seamlessly blended warrior-like fierceness with protective paternal care, effectively conveying Kulinda's dual nature as a fierce protector and nurturing guardian.
- **Distinct Mātu (Speech Style):** Employing tribal speech patterns and the dialect of Uttara Karnāṭaka, Joshi's deep, commanding voice enhanced Kulinda's authority and presence, adding authenticity to the character's portrayal.

4. VM Joshi's Portrayal of Vāsanti in Yakṣaloka Vijaya

In the Kālpanika Prasaṅga (fictional narrative) Yakṣaloka Vijaya, V M Joshi's portrayal of Vāsanti marked a groundbreaking moment in Yakṣagāna, particularly in the depiction of Strī vēśa (female roles).

Trendsetting Portrayal

Vāsanti, an unconventional female character in Yakṣagāna, was brought to life by Joshi in a manner that challenged traditional norms. His performance set a new precedent for the portrayal of female roles in the art form.

Innovative Stage Presence

- **Silent Entry:** Contrary to customary character introductions, Joshi had Vāsanti enter the stage silently, creating suspense and engaging the audience's curiosity.

- **Delayed Dialogue:** By initially refraining from speech and responding only after audience reactions, Joshi heightened realism and deepened audience engagement, making Vāsanti's eventual expressions more impactful.

Depth in Characterization

In the Pīṭhika Prakaraṇa, Joshi elaborated on Vāsanti's life, providing emotional depth to the character. The performance depicted a gradual transformation from a passive shelter-giver to a ruthless exploiter, showcasing Joshi's ability to convey complex character arcs.

5. V.M. Joshi's Portrayal of Vidura in Kṛṣṇa Sandhāna

Sri V. M. Joshi's portrayal of Vidura in the Yakṣagāna play Kṛṣṇa Sandhāna exemplifies his profound understanding of character embodiment and mastery of expressive techniques.

Eloquent Oratory Reflecting Vidura's Wisdom

Joshi's portrayal was enriched by his exceptional oratory skills. Through eloquent dialogues, he conveyed Vidura's profound wisdom and understanding of statecraft, as encapsulated in Vidura Nīti. His delivery captured the nuances of Vidura's counsel, emphasizing the importance of righteousness, justice, and moral duty.

Depiction of Devotion and Humility

In scenes depicting Vidura's interactions with Lord Kṛṣṇa, Joshi portrayed deep reverence and humility. Upon Kṛṣṇa's entrance, Joshi's Vidura would immediately prostrate at his feet, a gesture symbolizing profound respect and devotion. He would welcome Kṛṣṇa with heartfelt praises, utilizing his eloquence to extol Kṛṣṇa's virtues and divine attributes. This portrayal highlighted Vidura's unwavering devotion and the sanctity of their relationship.

Innovative Staging to Illustrate Internal Conflict

Joshi introduced the concept of depicting multiple *prvṛtti*-s simultaneously on stage. Prior to entering the Kaurava court, he would perform dialogues between Vidura and Kṛṣṇa on a separate

section of the stage. This technique allowed the audience to witness Vidura's internal deliberations and his counsel to Kṛṣṇa.

V.M. Joshi's Contributions to Yakṣagāna Āhārya

V.M. Joshi was a transformative figure in the evolution of Yakṣagāna's visual aesthetics. His innovations in makeup, headgear, and costume design not only enhanced the visual appeal of performances but also improved the comfort and expressiveness of the artists.

1. Innovations in Facial Makeup

- **Introduction of Glued Mustaches:** Traditionally, Yakṣagāna performers used tied or charcoal-enhanced mustaches. Joshi introduced the use of glued mustaches, providing a more realistic appearance and ensuring they remained secure during dynamic performances.
- **Customized Cheek Makeup:** Prior to Joshi's influence, shading and rouge were not commonly applied to the cheeks in Yakṣagāna makeup. He pioneered the use of cheek makeup tailored to each character's personality, enhancing expressiveness and aiding in character differentiation.

2. Revolutionizing Headgear (Kirīṭa)

- **Transition from Wood to Aluminum:** Traditional headgear, such as Hakki Kirīṭa or Āne Kirīṭa, were crafted from wood and could weigh between 6–8 kg, posing challenges for performers. Joshi innovated by constructing these headpieces from aluminum, reducing the weight to approximately 1–1.5 kg. This change allowed for greater mobility and comfort during performances.
- **Use of Dry Grass in Paḡaḍe Kirīṭa:** The Paḡaḍe Kirīṭa was traditionally shaped using cloth stuffing. Joshi replaced the cloth with dry grass, further lightening the headgear while

maintaining its distinctive shape.

3. Costume Innovation in Hanumanta Portrayal

- **Introduction of Green Upper Garment:** In traditional portrayals of Māruti (Hanumanta), performers wore a small dhoti with a bare upper body. Joshi introduced the practice of wearing a green upper garment, adding a distinctive visual identity to the character. The green attire may have symbolized divinity, vibrancy, and grandeur, enhancing Māruti's presence on stage.

Joshi's contributions to Yakṣagāna Āhārya have had a lasting impact, influencing costume conventions and setting new standards for performance aesthetics.

Challenges in Documenting V.M. Joshi's Legacy

Despite V.M. Joshi's significant contributions to Yakṣagāna, several factors have impeded comprehensive documentation of his work. These challenges are outlined below:

a. Lack of Visual Documentation

During Joshi's era, performances were rarely recorded, resulting in a scarcity of visual materials to study his nuanced physical expressions and movements. This absence hampers detailed analysis of his performance techniques.

b. Subjective Interpretations

In the absence of standardized documentation, recollections from audiences and co-artists serve as primary sources. However, these oral accounts can vary, leading to inconsistencies and potential inaccuracies in understanding his style and contributions.

c. Discontinuation of Certain Roles and Prasāṅga-s

Some characters portrayed by Joshi, such as Vāsanti in Yakṣaloka Vijaya, ceased to be performed after his demise. This discontinuation limits opportunities for newer generations to observe and learn from his interpretations firsthand.

d. Evolution of Yakṣagāna Performance Styles

Yakṣagāna has undergone stylistic changes over time, with contemporary performances differing in movements, expressions, and makeup. These evolutions make it challenging to replicate or study Joshi's unique approach within the current performance context.

e. Oral Tradition Versus Academic Documentation

Yakṣagāna traditionally relies on oral transmission, lacking a standardized notation system for recording aspects like Āṅika. Unlike classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, which have established documentation methods, Yakṣagāna's oral nature complicates efforts to preserve and study individual artists' contributions systematically.

Findings

The study reveals several key aspects of V.M. Joshi's contributions to Yakṣagāna, highlighting his innovative approaches and the challenges in documenting his legacy.

Elevation of Supporting Roles

V.M. Joshi possessed a unique ability to transform minor characters into memorable performances. His portrayal of Kulinda in Ratnāvati Kalyāṇa and Vāsanti in Yakṣaloka Vijaya exemplifies this talent, where he infused depth and significance into these roles, making them standout performances despite their secondary status.

Mastery in Costume and Prop Utilization

Joshi's innovative use of costumes and stage props added a distinctive layer to his performances. Notably, he introduced the use of a live mango branch in Kālīdaśa Caritre, a green upper garment for Māruti (Hanumanta), and a unique double pagaḍe for Kulinda. These innovations enhanced the visual appeal and authenticity of his character portrayals.

Linguistic Proficiency in Characterization

Joshi's command over various dialects and languages enriched his character portrayals. For instance, his use of the Ghāṭī-style speech for Kirāta and the transition from Kannaḍa to Samskr̥ta in the portrayal of Kālidāsa in Kālidāsa Caritre showcased his linguistic versatility, adding depth and authenticity to his performances.

Intense Emotional and Dramatic Expression

Joshi's performances were marked by a profound emotional intensity. In his portrayal of Akrūra in Kamsavadhe, he demonstrated deep devotion through expressive physical movements, such as rolling on the ground to absorb the sacred soil of Vṛndāvana. This act symbolized his complete surrender to Krishna, making the performance deeply immersive and spiritual.

Conclusion:

V.M. Joshi's enduring legacy in Yakṣagāna exemplifies the profound impact an individual artist can have on a traditional art form. Through his innovative approaches to character portrayal, costume design, and performance techniques, Joshi not only enriched the aesthetic dimensions of Yakṣagāna but also expanded its expressive possibilities. His ability to elevate supporting characters to central figures, as seen in his portrayals of Kulinda and Vāsanti, underscores his transformative influence on narrative structures within performances.

Joshi's commitment to linguistic authenticity and emotional depth brought a new level of realism and relatability to Yakṣagāna, bridging the gap between classical traditions and contemporary sensibilities. His innovations in āhārya (costume and makeup) not only enhanced visual storytelling but also set new standards for future performers.

Despite the lack of comprehensive documentation, Joshi's contributions continue to resonate within the Yakṣagāna community, inspiring artists and scholars alike. His work serves as a testament to the dynamic nature of traditional arts and the importance of individual creativity in their evolution. Preserving and studying his legacy is crucial for understanding the development of Yakṣagāna and ensuring its vitality for future generations.

Future Scope:

The rich tapestry of Yakṣagāna has been woven by numerous legendary artists whose invaluable contributions remain largely undocumented. Veteran performers such as Moodkani Narayana Hegde, Murur Devaru Hegde, Mahabala Hegde, Dhareshwara Hasayada Subba and many others played pivotal roles in enriching the art form during the 19th and 20th centuries. However, due to a lack of systematic records, their artistic achievements risk being forgotten.

Documenting their contributions is essential to preserve their legacy, recognize their influence on Yakṣagāna, and inspire future generations of performers. Their innovations in performance, storytelling, and technique deserve acknowledgment so that their impact continues to shape Yakṣagāna for years to come.

Future research endeavors should focus on:

- **Oral Histories:** Conducting interviews with surviving contemporaries, family members, and students to capture firsthand accounts of these artists' techniques and philosophies.
- **Archival Exploration:** Unearthing and digitizing existing photographs, audio recordings, manuscripts, and performance notes to create a comprehensive repository of their work.
- **Academic Collaboration:** Encouraging interdisciplinary studies that analyze their contributions within broader cultural, historical, and artistic contexts.
- **Community Engagement:** Involving local communities in preserving and promoting the heritage of these artists through workshops, exhibitions, and performances.
- **Digital Preservation:** Using contemporary documentation tools to build a digital archive of Yakṣagāna, possibly modeled on initiatives such as those of the Kalakshetra Foundation or SPIC MACAY.

By undertaking these initiatives, scholars and practitioners can ensure that the legacies of these legends are honored and that their contributions continue to inspire and inform the evolution of Yakṣagāna.

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Appendix

The interview questions are provided in the appendix to maintain transparency in the research design and to allow readers to see the direct link between the research objectives and the data collection process. The following questions aim to capture VM Joshi's distinctive approaches across movement, appearance, dialogue, improvisation, and character portrayal.

How did VM Joshi use choreography and body movements to carry and develop a character?

In what ways did his use of costume, makeup, and visual presentation support character portrayal?

How did VM Joshi employ dialogues or vocal delivery to express and develop a character?

What made his movements unique compared to others in terms of style, energy, or expressiveness?

How did he use improvisation or spontaneous creativity on stage to enhance his performances?

Which characters did VM Joshi portray, and what specific qualities or techniques made each portrayal distinct?