

## Importance of Music in Kannada Professional Theatre

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**Abstract:** Music is an integral part of theatrical production. It supports and enhances the mood and atmosphere of a play. Music was so important in the yester years that the word saṅgīta was associated with the names of the most well-known drama troupes. There were songs to be rendered for each and every character and actors themselves would sing while acting. There was a time when there were plays without dialogues, but no plays were performed without music.

**Keywords:** Theatre, Kannada, Professional Theatre, Kannada Dramas, Stage Music, nāṭaka, raṅgaḡīte, raṅgasāṅgīta

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Nāṭaka or drama is regarded as a very effective audio visual medium that attracts both the scholars and the laymen. Parsi theatre<sup>1</sup> and Professional theatre<sup>2</sup>, both from the 19<sup>th</sup> century are said to be the first step of modern Indian theatre. The two branches of Kannada theatre –*vṛttiraṅgabhūmi* (Professional theatre) and *havyāsiraṅgabhūmi* (Amateur theatre)<sup>3</sup> have played a vital role in shaping Kannada dramas. *vṛttiraṅgabhūmi* primarily dealt with company dramas<sup>4</sup>.

### II. PROFESSIONAL DRAMA

Inspired by the Marathi and Parsi theatre performances, theatre activities first started in Northern region of erstwhile Mysore state (present North Karnataka) and later spread to the remaining areas. Sakkare Balacharya popularly known as Shantakavi, is hailed as the pioneer of Kannada dramas and his troupe *vīranārāyaṇaprasādīkākṛtāpurasaṅgītanāṭakamaṇḍalī* in the year 1874, is said to be Mysore state's first *vṛttināṭakamaṇḍalī* (Professional drama troupe). The then ruler of Mysore, Chamarajendra Wodeyar X, patronized the company *śākuntalakarnāṭakanāṭakasabha* in 1882 and it was later renamed as *śrījayachāmarājēndrakarnāṭakanāṭakasabha*. King became the integral strength of the 'Kannada Theatre Movement' and supported many troupes to perform dramas in the city of Mysore. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many drama companies emerged in the state of Mysore. As theatre bloomed with royal patronage, theatre music also developed with Indian classical music as its base. Company dramas often staged mythological plays drawn from *rāmāyaṇa*, *mahābhārata*, *bhāgavatapurāṇa* and invariably used classical music to enrich the beauty. Historical themes such as the lives of saint-poets like Sharana Basava, Tukaram, Kabir, Akkamahadevi were also enacted on the stage. Some of the popular mythological dramas of the early 1940s were *rāmāyaṇa*, *mahābhārata*, *dānasūrakarṇa*, *virāṭaparva*, *lavakuśa*, *venkatēśwaramahātme*, *daśavatāra* and so on.

### III. MUSIC IN PROFESSIONAL DRAMAS

Earlier, audience would watch dramas because of their rich music and popular songs. Even those who knew nothing about music started singing the drama songs so much so that, if there was no music in the play, audience would not consider it as a drama. Music had become an important component of dramas. Entire story of

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<sup>1</sup>Influenced by English dramas, Parsi community and the Zoroastrian community from Persia, who were present in the region of Bombay, started performing dramas in English, Gujrathi, Urdu, Hindusthani (Hindi). The theatre form created by them is termed as 'Parsi theatre' (Kumar 2016: 01)

<sup>2</sup>Professional theatre allowed the artists to earn a livelihood out of their performance.

<sup>3</sup>Amateur theatre was primarily performed as a hobby.

<sup>4</sup>Leader of the troupe would invest on his organization associated with actors, actresses, musicians and other technicians and would tour to different venues that involved ticketed performance.

the drama was depicted through songs. There used to be more than 50 songs in every drama. Right from the buffoon to the king and queen, each and every character would sing. It was a tradition to sing first - *anupallavi*, the second section of the song, followed by *pallavi*, the first section of the song. The unique aspect of Kannada theatre is that it has both styles of Indian classical music called Carnatic and Hindustani<sup>5</sup>.

Until 1930, drama companies used readily available classical music compositions such as *kṛti-s*, *pada-s* composed by composers like Saint Tyagaraja and Purandaradasa. Other musical forms like *Tillāna-s*, *jāvaḷi-s* also were given a place on stage as *raṅgasāṅgīta*. Many a times, melodies or tunes were borrowed from Carnatic music compositions and the lyrics were replaced with new phrases. For instance, the popular Carnatic musical piece *sāmajavaragamana* composed by saint Tyagaraja set to *hindōḷarāga* was used as *nānebalusukṛti* in the drama *rājasūyayāga* staged in 1937.

The dramas would commence at 9 or 10 in the night. At first the *sūtradhāra* would enter and invoke Lord Ganesha or any deity, and then the actual play would begin. Every scene would be filled with music so much so that a character would enter and exit the stage along with it. If a character walked on stage singing songs, the musicians would also walk behind the screen playing their instruments following the actor's movements. They would use different *rāga-s* like *bēgaḍa*, *aṭhāṇa*, *sahana*, *bhairavi*, *tōḍi*, *kēdāragauḷa*, *jañjūṭi*, *kāmbōji*, *kānaḍa*. The dramas would carry on till the early hours of the following morning and would conclude with a *maṅgaḷa* song in the *rāgamadhyaṃāvātorāṭhāṇa*.

During 1840s, though Marathi theatre took inspiration from Yakshagaana and other folk arts of Mysore region, Kannada theatre was heavily influenced by Marathi theatre in the later periods. Kannada dramas were filled with the tunes of Marathi songs. In the early 1900s, facing challenges from Marathi theatre, Sakkare Balacharya and *nāṭakaśirōmaṇi* A.V. Varadacharya of Mysore along with other artists created an independent identity for Kannada theatre. Varadacharya refined the stage music, set new trends and made the drama companies follow a new theatre music practice of singing *kanda* and *vṛtta* in Carnatic music style. (Ranganath. 1958:95). It was Varadacharya who created a 'sound pit' (hollow space in front of the stage) and made the musicians perform from the pit. Until then, musicians would sit on either side of the stage. This created good coordination between the characters on the stage and the musicians. He also used 'leg harmonium' in his dramas that helped produce wonderful sound effects for special situations. After 1930, musical compositions were composed exclusively for dramas and were called *raṅgaḷe-s*. Well-known personalities like Malavalli Subbanna, Harmonium player Yoganarasimha started composing tunes for dramas. Instruments like *sōḷa*<sup>6</sup>, Violin, Tabla, Leg harmonium were used. Western instruments like Piano, Clarinet were added on later.

#### IV. PROFESSIONAL DRAMA ARTISTS

Actors had to sing while acting. The primary criteria for actors were that they had to have a magnificent voice as well as good physique. Every actor, be it a male or female, had to sing in the same pitch. Men would sing at a high pitch (4 ½ or 5 *śruti*) which would match with the female pitch. In order to engage the audience between the scenes, it was a custom to sing from behind the screen every time when the curtain came down. Sometimes, songs not relevant to the theme would also be performed during the scenes. For instance, in a scene depicting natural beauty, the character would sing a 'Hindustani' song (Hindi song) or a popular devotional song. Though this did not make sense, it did not matter, as long as the audience enjoyed it. The actors were highly competitive on stage especially when the hero of the play - the king and the heroine - the queen would perform. An example of this was the popular duo Sundramma and Nagesh Rao. While performing on stage, their creative skills in music would be so high that, they would add elaborate improvisations like *sāṅgati*, *ālāpāna* and *swaraḥarastāra*. Many a time they would spontaneously sing a *vṛtta* or *asḷōka* in *rāgamālika* with ease. Each of the songs would have a duration of about an hour. When there would be a rift between the hero and heroine, the hero would sing and console the heroine. Musical duets between rivals would be so intense that the audience themselves would have to intervene to bring about a peaceful end.

When the audience really liked a performance they would shout 'once more' and the artists would oblige. This resulted in funny situations during the performances where an actor was supposed to sing a song and die. In order to grant the audience's request, the actor acting dead, would actually come back to life, sing the song and die again.

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<sup>5</sup>In Kannada dramas, both Carnatic and Hindustani style of singing are incorporated. (Interview with Veteran theatre artist Paramashivan).

<sup>6</sup>*sōḷa* was used to match the singer's pitch with that of the instruments. It was shaped like a *tānpura* but without the gourd. Drama master would strum the strings of the *sōḷa* to maintain the pitch. (Akshara. 2018:49)

Microphones were not available in the early years of company dramas. Even though the actors were performing without using microphones, the audience seated in the last row were also able to hear and enjoy the performance. Such was the charm and allure of company dramas.

Kannada drama companies had the flavors of different genres of music. Carnatic classical, Hindustani classical music, Western, Marathi *abhaṅg-s* and folk tunes were being used. For instance, *rāmāyaṇanāṭaka* had more than 200 songs and it is remarkable that all the above said forms of music were used in it. *laṅkādīpālanadēva* from the same drama was tuned in western music style. It was popularly known as ‘western note’.

The word *saṅgīta* was associated with the names of the most well-known drama companies. For instance, *śrikāḍasiddhēśwarasaṅgītanāṭakamaṇḍali*, *śrimahālakṣmiprasādikaṅgītanāṭakamaṇḍali*, *viśwagunādarśasaṅgītanāṭakamaṇḍali*, *śridattātrēyasaṅgītanāṭakamaṇḍali* etc. Popular actors like, Kotturappa, Nagesha Rao, Malavalli Sundamma, Bellary Lalitamma, Jayamma, Honnappa Bhagavata, Shrikanthamurthy, Holali Narasimha Shastry, Paramashivan, Dr Rajkumar were called *gāyakaṇaṭa-s* – Actors who were prolific singers.

## V. CONCLUSION

Music was used to describe, narrate, illustrate, bridge and as a background score in all the professional company dramas. Music had a great impact on the audience. It had become an irreplaceable and significant aspect of dramas so much so that, many a time music took the center stage while the drama itself took a backseat.

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