

# Ancient Folk Tales Of Coastal Karnataka

Improvised performances that last from dusk till dawn and female characters played by male actors are just some of the distinctive elements of the ancient performance art that is Yakshagana. Audiences are treated to fierce method acting narration of poetic epics, guided by a unique musical form.



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**I**t was a fine view to wake up to—an unobstructed sprawl of blue, tinged by a faded orange, gaining a bloody tone by the second. Not a single pesky horn, nor the vibrating whirr of a phone. It offered unprecedented relief from Bengaluru's breathless vibe. The waves crashed into the bleached beach with a relentless rhythm. Holding a warm tumbler of filter *kaapi* in hand, I ambled bare feet onto the sand to inspect a flurry of activity that had broken out a few hundred meters away from my room—still nothing like the city buzz. A nearby fishing village had sprung into action to unload fresh catch from a boat that was returning from sea. Scores of tanned fishermen with sinewy legs tugged at the ropes to help it dock and women armed with baskets, restlessly inched closer to get their hands on the best fish, as soon as it was dropped. The daily rigmarole of this fishing village in Yermal on the west coast of Karnataka, infused such contrasting uniqueness to my usual city morning that I almost forgot that I had to meet the village's organising committee of the Kambala Buffalo Race.

A scene from the epic Mahabharata, depicting a conversation between Arjuna and Sudhanva, son of Hamsadhvaja.

It was late February and the buffalo-racing season was almost coming to an end. Unable to strip myself off the delicious commotion that had panned out on the beach, I bargained with myself for an additional half hour, using the extra minutes to be richer by some photographs. I am not quite the lens woman but capturing local activities like weaving, fishing, and farming that are pertinent to daily lives, makes me relive the place much better, than momentous occasions. I was smiling satisfactorily into my camera screen after reviewing a few shots, when I felt someone loom over my shoulder and murmur an approval, 'hmm, *chenna-gidiya*.' An old fisherman, retired from



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Top and below left: Scenes from Mahishasuramardini, an Yakshagana performance by Sri Chandrasekara Navada and troupe at Suratkal; below right: heavy anklets and armbands add to the swift tempo of the dance.

## YAKSHAGANA IS A FOLK THEATRE FORM DATING back to the bhakti movement of the 7th century.



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## TRADITIONAL PERCUSSION instruments like *chende*, *maddale*, and *chakratala* form the background and score to the nuanced movements.

passed in the dialogue exchange till the play reached a crescendo and the demons were startled to the ground. The intensity of the performance razzled children, who by the end, clung onto their mothers' hands.

As dawn approached, the crowd shifted and some older members of the audience stifled their yawns. It had been a night of a fierce performance. Since a large part of the audience was from the fishing village of Yermal, the call of duty at the beach had to be kept in mind. The performance descended from the peak to a charging end and the hall erupted into thunderous applause. We straightened our limbs and started the walk back. The remnants of the performance stayed with the audience, as they tramped out, astounded into silence. It seemed that everyone was assimilating the impassioned performance, till someone broke the poignant silence, saying out one of the dialogues loudly. Laughter broke the stunned stupor.

My newly found clique made it straight to the beach, just in time for the boats. While they got back to business, I knew that somewhere the work of the Goddess had deeply affected them. They slipped into the routine, knowing that another night of this otherworldly theatre held a promise of enigmatic old tales. ■

Yakshagana performers do their own make-up. Heavy face make-up is essential to depict heavenly characters.

### FACT FILE

- Getting There: Yermal lies 45 km north of Mangalore, and is well connected by local buses that ply periodically from the city. Mangalore, in turn, is well connected by flight, train, and road, from major cities of South India.
- When To Visit: The Yakshagana troupes start performing around the end of November and performances go up till end of May. The best time though is in February.
- Tip: Yakshagana performances are held as per the local calendar. It is prudent to be connected to your local accommodation beforehand, who are most likely to know the exact schedule.



Photo: Dinodia

had organised an overnight performance. These performances are known to start at twilight and go on till the wee hours. Presumably, this time was suited to everyone after work. Being the urban odd one out, I was immediately offered a chair, instead of the large mat that had been spread for the locals. Embarrassed and touched by the hospitality, I sat for a few minutes and then shifted to the floor, legs folded, neck craning over a sea of eager heads to see the stage burst into a lively performance. Halting Hindi, fractured Kannada, and Google came to rescue as I manoeuvred through the performance.

Sporting elaborate headgears slathered in make-up, actors exploded into dialogues. As traditional theatre goes, men took on the roles of women as well, though with smaller headgears. Traditional percussion instruments like *chende*, *maddale*, and *chakratala* formed the background score to the nuanced movements. The episode evolved from the creation of the Trinity, 'Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara' by the supreme Goddess to electric war scenes and discourses. Powerful dialogues and a strong depiction of the Gods held everyone captivated. The concentration of the unblinking audience was only broken by the entry of Indra, another addition to the loaded coterie of divinity on stage. Soon, an army of demons demolished them until Goddess Durga came to the rescue—slaying all evil, including Chanda, Munda, Mahishasura, Rakhbija, and Shumbha Nishumba. Before we knew it, hours had

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