

"IMAGINATION is more important than knowledge", said Albert Einstein.

And it is Einstein I thought of when I met one of the most imaginative sons of India, Dr. Shivarama Karanth.

He has the same moustache, the deep, intense eyes. The small frame of the 84-year-old exudes authority and an aura of genius.

Dr. K. Shivarama Karanth — author, litterature, rationalist, thinker, experimentalist in art, researcher, writer of science literature for children, lexicographer, winner of Jnanapith award, renovator of Yakshaga-

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na — was in and out of Madras on one of his many unannounced visits.

In Madras, on the way back to Karnataka from Pondicherry, Dr. Karanth was asked to make a brief speech at a hastily organised programme at the Karnataka Sangha. No prior notice, no publicity — but quite a few admirers turned up.

Dr. Karanth spoke in his inimitable way about Yakshagana, the way he presented it and his reasons for doing so...

The performance of the "Sasirekha Parinaya" episode that followed, justified every word he spoke.

When you meet him, he intimidates you. If you get over it and ask him some provocative questions, you are likely to rouse the lion in him. Angry sparks fly from his eyes like so many twinkling stars....

Why was it necessary to refine Yakshagana?

"Yakshagana, the wonderful theatre form with all its splendour, was lying hidden from the world view in the folds of the ghats of South Canara. Its beauty and richness captured my heart. The artists who presented this fantastic art were languishing. They could afford only cheap and garish costumes. My intention was not to revive it or change it, but by getting it the recognition it deserved, to make it more challenging. I made a study of Yakshagana in detail, and decided to focus on the link of emotion to every movement and rhythm executed."

Dr. Karanth had been experimenting with various aspects of theatre at that time. The musical play, dance drama, silent play, silent acting, shadow play — all these were forms he delved into.

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Yakshagana owes its distinctive form to the use of recitative modes of poetry, melodies, rhythm, dance technique and, above all, costuming and make-up. The structure and style of contemporary Yakshagana incorporates many features of old Kannada literature in its thematic content, poetry, stylistic features and prose narrative forms.

Dr. Karanth says he fell in love with Yakshagana because every turn of emotion, every shade of feeling, can be expressed in this music. "The human heart, its every throb, seems to be recorded in Yakshagana music, which is why I started the let-us-preserve-these for posterity campaign".

But you are accused of diluting the art form by removing dialogue, which is the very essence of Yakshagana?

"Hopping from music to prose, from one medium to another, created gaps and, to me, it seemed like dissonance, disharmony and non-art. I strove to fulfil the real need to unify the various elements of Yakshagana — the dance, music, gesture, with the meaning, and the meaning with the emotive aspect."

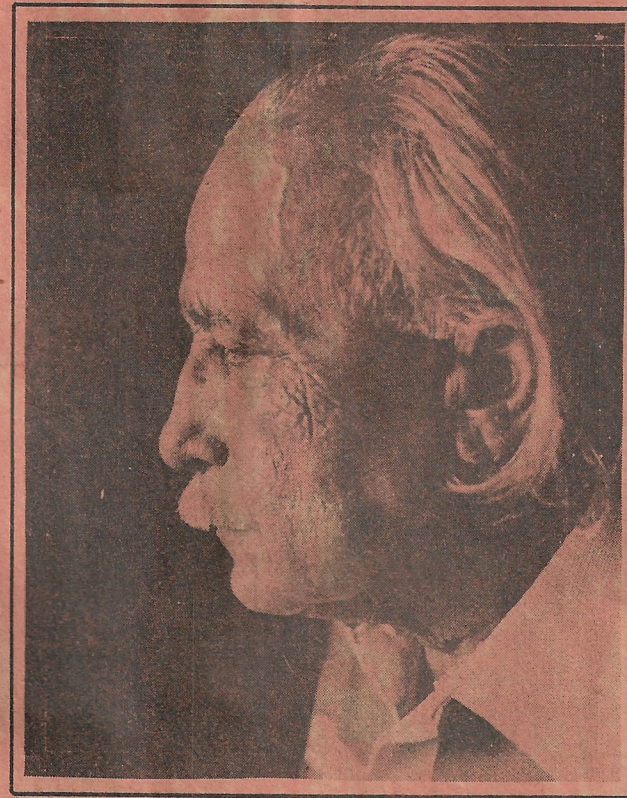
Dr. Karanth, a young revolutionary who had given up his formal education to join Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha, had been disillusioned very quickly. He felt it was better to work with the people, than to go to jail.

The values that Gandhism developed in him were very strong. As a young man, he wrote novels, short stories and essays in Kannada that illustrated his inner struggles and landscaped South Canara life. In Puttur, Karanth organised a series of Dasara festivals, whose intention was to make people think and talk about the richness of the Indian artistic heritage. These festivals had games in the mornings, talks and discussions on literature, art, science, history and politics in the evenings and entertainment at night.

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# 'I must sing my own song'



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A pen-sketch of the versatile mind of Dr. K. SHIVARAMA KARANTH.

worldly pre-occupation with a dead past.

"An essential feature of Yakshagana is that the play is conceived as a fantasy dealing with heroes, gods and demons. Such stories are moralistic in outlook and, of course, portray the victory of good over evil.

"Let us remember that art deals with problems in a symbolic manner. Sure, one cannot solve the problem of poverty by

writing a sonnet or play, but the motivation for work can be supplied by art", he stresses.

Dr. Shivarama Karanth saw that Yakshagana was deteriorating for want of serious professional artists. During the season, a few amateurs of the village would put on costumes and, to lure spectators, made the dances easy and cinematic. Irrelevant modern stage techniques crept in. The time-

consuming and heavy headgear yielded to makeshift hair styles. There was hour-long dialogue, and the oratory of a few gifted men drew crowds. "Vachika" (speech) was taken to be the main element of Yakshagana.

With a connoisseur's heart and a researcher's head, Dr. Karanth started delving into the depths of Yakshagana. He wrote "Yakshagana — Bayalata" in 1958. This won the Sangeet Natak Akademi award and later the Swedish Academy award. He organised a series of seminars to establish the identity of ragas, to decide the standard of costumes and abhinaya and to experiment with ballet form of Yakshagana, from which he sought to remove the dialogue. And he nurtured a troupe of traditional artists who could perform for non-Kannada audiences.

Omission of dialogue became the main theme of people who criticised him. They said his experiments were a radical departure from tradition.

"I have omitted only the extempore dialogue. The accusations of radical departure and going against tradition comes easily to people who restrict themselves to a narrow region and a narrow vision of the possibilities.

"To me, coherence is the very soul of art. A need for aesthetic unity was never felt by the traditional Yakshagana artists. The drums effectively drowned out the singing of the "Bhagavatha," while the audience waited only for the actor to open his mouth and speak. Through Yaksha-Ranga, I have reinstated the Bhagavatha to his rightful place."

Dr. Karanth called the ballet form of Yakshagana "Yaksha Ranga," and felt the need to start a school for Yakshagana — to train young, intelligent men in the authentic style of Yakshagana, so that, with their scholastic background, they would arrest or slow down the process of deterioration. He sold his idea to the MGM college, Udipi, and the Sangeet Natak Akademi and soon the beats of maddale, the tinkling of cymbals and the ringing voice of the Bhagavatha filled the college and later spread nationwide and abroad.

Karanth is also accused of making Yakshagana so sophisticated that it appeals only to the educated class.

"You mean, by educated, those who come out of college. But if by education you mean learning

to cultivate one's emotional and aesthetic senses... I occasionally hold rehearsals for Yakshagana in my village. I keep them open for all people. Sometimes the hall is choked with people. Many are illiterates by school standards, but their reactions were as sharp, if not better, than those of any educated audience."

"I feel what I attempted to do with Yakshagana operas was in line with tradition. Of course, I know my limitations, yet I must sing my own song, create my own art, derive my own joy. Some have liked it, others have not. Nobody has the right to

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question my bona-fides, the right of an artiste to interpret art as he feels and understands, to question life as he sees it. I value tradition, but I also know that tradition is not a stagnant pool. Tradition has to renew itself, to replenish itself by moving, changing and flowing towards the ocean of life..."

It has often been commented that modern India has nothing comparable to the genius of tradition in any field. Dr. Karanth's creative extension of the Yakshagana tradition stands as a counter to that line of thought.

But we realise the magnitude of his genius when we understand his revival of Yakshagana is only a part of Dr. Karanth's life. He has published memorable novels, monumental science digests, has made children's toys, invented a carpenter's tool, been a journalist, has chronicled a wide range of themes.

Now, his passion is children. He has produced many informative digests for children in their own perspective. He collects pictures, draws them himself, does the lay-out, editing, and printing, all on his own...

At 86, he keeps travelling all over the world. He has called his autobiography "Hutchumanasina Hathu Mukhagalu" (The ten faces of a crazy mind).

But his life has so many facets to it, so much achieved in every field, that it is impossible to chronicle the being named Dr. Shivarama Karanth.

V. R. Devila