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Yakshagana: The Epistemology of Performance in the Indian Knowledge Tradition

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Abstract

This paper examines Yakshagana, a traditional performative art form of Karnataka, as a site for oral transmission of Indian knowledge, and emphasises its epistemological value, which is different from Western text-based traditions. While Western epistemology prioritises the written word as a knowledge source, Indian tradition has recognised ideas such as *Śruti* (what is heard), *Smriti* (recollection) and *Śabda Pramāṇa* (verbal testimony). Yakshagana is an example in which oral traditions are social processes, which form dynamic systems of philosophy, ethics and cultural cosmology. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are not only memory aids that encourage oral performances and improvisation, but these sacred epics become sites for ethical questioning, existential pondering, and collective grappling. Actor-transmitters communicate philosophic concepts through gesture, voice and free-form conversation, urging the audience to join in a collective inquiry spanning dharma, karma, maya and moksha. The paper contends that the Yakshagana is not just heritage, but an epistemology as well; that resists textualising paradigms, maintains adaptability, and promotes experiential, communal and embodied learning. In the contemporary landscape of digital and text-based expression, Yakshagana reminds us that knowledge is not static but a lived social process which is maintained through oral tradition and collective memory.

Keywords: Yakshagana, Oral Tradition, Indian Epistemology, Performative Knowledge, Collective Memory.

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1.0 Introduction

From the earliest history of Indian civilisation, knowledge has not been restricted to the written word alone. It has lived up until now in the breath of chanting priests, the gestures of dancers, the voices of storytellers, and the community memory of generations. Teaching and learning in India have long held great respect for 'oral and embodied modes of transmission', meaning that knowledge was not only written down but, more importantly, 'lived through experience and shared through the transmission of knowledge' (Mahapatra 1994 and Karttunen 1998). The Vedas[1], some of the oldest repositories of knowledge in the world, were transmitted orally for many centuries before embarking upon the path of being written down (Staal 2008). This follows from a philosophy that authentic knowledge has first to be heard, remembered, and enacted before it can become fixed in written form (Staal 2008).

Yakshagana[2] stands as a clear example that India has still maintained the belief that performing arts constitute a way of knowing. A far more complex knowledge transfer system than mere entertainment, Yakshagana brings into being its message through intense dance, impassioned narration, brilliant costumes, and dialogue-in-the-moment on *dharma*[3] (ethical duty), *karma*[4] (action and consequence), and the nature of cosmic order (Ashton & Christie 1977). Neither does the narrative alone resonate with meaning; the act of performance itself-the voice, body, rhythm, and collective presence-comes to be engaged in philosophical inquiry. From the vantage point of investigating how Yakshagana and India's broader oral traditions convert performance into philosophy; we will first look at the very essence of oral knowledge systems in India and the philosophical status that is attributed to verbal testimony. Then we will examine how Yakshagana works as an embodied system of knowledge, channelling more complex ethical and metaphysical ideas via the language of drama. Furthermore, we will finally consider the relevance of oral traditions today, arguing that while the world has become increasingly text-based and technology-oriented, oral traditions still stand as important alternative reservoirs of knowledge across the globe.

1.1 Objective

The objective of this paper is to explore how Yakshagana can provide the understanding through which we could study epistemology in the Indian knowledge tradition, especially the oral and performance as an 'epistemic' domain. The reason for this focus is to understand how Yakshagana as an embodied art form transmits philosophical, ethical and culturally constituted knowledge through performance, gesture, and voice (as opposed to textual authority).

1.2 Methodology

This study is based on secondary sources, including scholarly works on Yakshagana, Indian oral traditions, and classical texts that discuss the concepts of *śhruti*[5], *smṛti*[6], and *śabda pramāṇa*[7]. The analysis critically reviews existing literature to follow the conceptual linkages that connect performance with epistemology. This study, by integrating the perspectives from performance studies and the Indian philosophical framework, seeks to interpret how Yakshagana embodies knowledge systems in the larger continuum of India's oral and performative traditions.

1.3 Review of Literature

The review takes a distinct thematic approach, using scholarly works not just to categorise topics, but to illuminate and analyse the themes themselves. In doing so, it prioritises a deeper understanding, engaging with the scholarship to explain and enrich the themes rather than merely organising the literature around them.

1.3.1 Indian Epistemology and the Primacy of Orality

The intellectual traditions of India bring about a profound rethinking with regard to knowledge. While western epistemology emphasises the written text and experience method, the various Indian philosophical systems outwardly reflect a worldview wherein orality and embodied memory hold a central place. Knowledge, as Devy (2020) argues, is not conceived as a static object requiring archiving, but as an ongoing process of hearing, recalling, and performing. In this section, we discuss the primacy of orality in Indian epistemology by concentrating on the three major concepts: *Śruti* (what is heard), *Smriti* (what is remembered), and *Śabda Pramāṇa* (establishment of a valid knowledge through verbal testimony). We also explore the reasons why oral transmission was not considered equal to writing but was often considered to be superior to it in preserving and transmitting knowledge, highlighting the Indian conception of knowledge as a living experience rather than a static object.

1.3.1.1 Śruti and Smriti: The Foundations of Oral Knowledge

According to classical Indian philosophy, especially within the Vedic tradition[8], the Shruti and Smriti are sharply distinct. Both terms are used in defining something remembered and communicated, but they are at different levels of authority and origins (Pollock 2011). Shruti means literally 'that which is heard'. It denotes a corpus of sacred texts that were, along with the *Veda*[9], revealed to seers with spiritual ears, not through normal means of perception (Gautam 2013). The four Vedas (Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva)[10] are considered *Śruti.* Their authority is supreme, as they are said to be *Apauruṣeya*[11], that is, not composed by human beings but eternal and impersonal truths (Leach 2014). For a long time, Shruti was transmitted by word of mouth alone, with no effort having been made toward its written-down form until relatively recently. Thus, the Vedic tradition developed quite intricate ways of memorising: *padapāṭha*[12]-word-by-word recitation, *krama-pāṭha*[13]-recitation in two-word sequences, make sure that transmission was absolutely accurate (Leach 2014). Any error, slight or grave, in the intonation would have been considered detrimental to the spiritual potency of the knowledge itself. This emphasis on the hearing and recitation has, at its core, a strong philosophical stance: the truth should be integrated into life rather than lifted from an external and static source.

Smriti, meaning "that which is remembered," includes texts such as the *Mahabharata*[14], *Ramayana*[15], *Puranas*[16], and *Dharmaśāstras*[17] (Gautam 2013). Attributed to human authors and slightly less authoritative than Shruti, Smriti guides the interpretation of eternal truths in changing human contexts. It is an evolving memory, transmitted and reinterpreted across generations, reflecting the Indian emphasis on knowledge as a living act of hearing and remembering (Shrimali 2011).

1.3.1.2 Verbal Testimony as a Valid Source of Knowledge

Verbal testimony is accepted as a valid and, in some cases, authoritative source of knowledge in Indian epistemology (Bilimoria 1988). Although perception (*pratyakṣa*)[18], inference (*anumāna*)[19] and comparison (*upamāna*)[20] are commonly *pramanas*[21], in the case of valid knowledge, testimony from an authoritative source, such as the Vedas, a guru or wise elders, is adequate. Various schools of Hinduism emphasise its importance in different ways: the Nyaya[22] school considers *Śabda*[23] to be a proper source of knowledge when the knowledge cannot be ascertained through direct sense perception or inference; the Mimamsa[24] school of Kashika interprets *śabda* no less than Vedic, words are inherently revealing of meaning and worthy of being sought after; while Vedanta[25] states that language must coincide with experience evidenced by reason, referring to these two epistemically equivalent contexts as "natural" discourse (*Lokavyavahara*[26]) and scriptural discourse (Bronkhors 2022).

Scholars argue that knowledge cannot be gained only through direct experience and logic. Oral transmission is, in contrast, an autonomous and solid path to knowledge with memory, attention and experience of life invested in the spoken word (Bilimoria 1988 and Bhattacharya 2006). The acceptance of *śabda* challenges our modern text-centric biases and shows that when the spoken word is faithfully preserved, it can still be authoritative and transformative.

1.3.2. Orality Versus Writing: The Indian Epistemology of Oral Transmission

In the classical Indian thought, oral transmission was seen as an ideal way of preserving and communicating knowledge. Knowledge, especially sacred and philosophical knowledge, has been understood to be experiential, relational, and embodied and therefore to be received through attentive listening, memory, and active orientation (Cenkner 1982 and Devy & Brown 2010). Oral transmission, as opposed to writing, established a community of learners and guaranteed interpretative flexibility, ensuring knowledge to be alive and flexible over generations.

1.3.2.1 Knowledge as an Embodied Process

In Indian epistemology, knowledge (*jnana*[27]) was transformative, not an end in itself. Listening to the Vedas, chanting of *mantras*[28], and performing rituals were not just acts aiming to garner information but were constituted within processes of internalization and embodiment of truth (Shastri 2002 and Siderits 2009). Orality becomes, in itself, a vibrant channel of knowledge: for the transmission of both content and intention, emotion, and spiritual presence, one uses the human voice, aided by both memory and devotion. Recitation was seen as a practice of *yoga*[29], uniting the mind, body, and spirit toward the realisation of the self. Analytical insight here reveals orality changing knowledge into an active, lived state, stressing participation and moral cultivation over passive reception in engagement with the knowledge presented.

1.3.2.2 Preservation of Purity

Vedic tradition gave emphasis to phonetic accuracy, as it considered the syllables and sounds of *Sanskrit*[30] to be spiritually charged (Deshpande 1993). The oral methods-performed as a cumulative memory-integrated learning with the maintenance of the textual integrity.

Recitation and communal verification ensured that errors were promptly corrected, thus enhancing reliability. Oral transmission was seen as a protector of both linguistic and spiritual integrity and was a working-out of the motto of maintaining a vigilant presence medium of the deliberate epistemologies.

1.3.2.3 Dynamic Adaptability

The simultaneously oral culture ideally endowed knowledge with the versatility necessary for cultural evolution to maintain its nuanced depth (Cenkner 1982 and Shrimali 2011). While scripts of the course were taught the same way, the derivative texts and theatrical performances like *Yakshagana*, *Kathakali*[31], and *Koodiyattam*[32] underwent transformations in narrations, dramaturgical styles, and moral shades to conform to the changing social ambience. The performers and pedagogues engaged in a dialectical relationship, advocating fidelity along with innovation. Therefore, it points out that oral transmission is not a stagnant entity. Instead, it is a very living, acting entity that keeps knowledge current while never in action, endangering its fundamental principles.

In essence, the Indian epistemology presents knowledge as active, related, interactive, and experiential. Oral transmission, in its complete form, realised through physical performance in an arena of mutual acknowledgement and adaptive creativeness, declares itself as an advanced system of knowledge with all philosophical-metaphysical content that shows that knowledge can "breathe, move, and transform", that is, in interaction with other human beings (Turri 2017).

1.3.3. Yakshagana: Scholarship on Performance and Knowledge Transmission

In the last few decades, scholars have examined Yakshagana, a traditional performative art form, from multiple perspectives, mostly in terms of the performative, aesthetic, and socio-cultural aspects. However, most of the studies have concentrated on the nature and form of the performing art, and have understudied its 'epistemic foundations'. Ashton (1969), arguably one of the earliest in-depth studies of Yakshagana, placed it within the continuum of South Indian folk and classical performances. His work emphasises the historical continuity and community-based preservation of practices- such as improvised dialogue and *raga*[33]-based singing passed down through generations. Padmanabha and Kumar (2021), analysed the themes of Yakshagana, such as contemporary social and ethical issues, including environmental awareness, public health, and empowerment of women. His work emphasises the pedagogic flexibility and ethical potential of the performing tradition as the narrative emanating from tradition becomes a reflection on ethics and a collective understanding of self in the face of modernity. Moreover, Singh (2025) examines the material and the symbolic nature of the performance through the study of costumes. Singh shows how this costume designs mediate the performer's identity and social meaning, shaping the performer's embodiment and the audience's cognition.

Scholars like Kāranta (1997) analysed Yakshagana's aesthetic dimensions by looking at music, dance, and dialogue, which form the embodiment of *bhakti*[34] (devotion) and *tattva*[35] (philosophical discourse). This study addresses the confluence of spiritual and epistemic meanings embedded in the act of performance; however, failed to give a systematic study of the same with reference to larger Indian systems of knowledge. Bilimale (2023) redefined Yakshagana through its multiple adaptations of the *Ramayana* and presents the art form as a site of cultural negotiation and reinterpretation. By emphasising the fluidity of mythic

retelling, he shows Yakshagana as a kind of performative archive through which communities perpetually renegotiate their moral, philosophical, and cultural values.

Although the scholars have given various interpretations of Yakshagana themes, its costume and the performance as a whole, there is still a need to examine Yakshagana within the arena of Indian epistemology, focusing on the concepts such as *śruti, smriti,* and *shabda pramana*. Scholars have understudied Yakshagana as an epistemic domain, that is, one that represents oral transmission *(śruti)* yet ever reconstructs memory and tradition *(smriti)*. Consistent interaction between the performer, text, and audience nurtures a shared Yakshagana epistemic ambience in which *śabda* (the world, sound, or utterances) serves to both deliver and authenticate knowledge. By probing Yakshagana from the Indian epistemology perspective, we can examine how performance serves as a means of knowledge—an ever-evolving and embodied process in which ethical, cultural, and metaphysical understandings are transmitted and renewed in the community.

1.4 Yakshagana: A Performing Knowledge System

This section examines Yakshagana not primarily as an art form but as a living medium for transmitting philosophy, ethics, and cultural cosmology, exploring the crucial roles of memory, improvisation, and embodied expression. It is a traditional night-long narrative performance that draws from sacred epics such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Bhagavata Purana*[36] (Ashton1969). Memory is one of Yakshagana's most vital dimensions. Performers remember a vast repertoire of stories, verses, and lines of philosophical thought (Soni 2009). The *prasanga*[37] or narrative text provides only the framework of the story; the living memory of the artist, created through years of listening, observing, and practising, breathes meaning into it (Padmanabha & Kumar 2019). While the performers remember the general canon, they also adapt what they remember for the particular performance at hand.

One of the major distinctions of Yakshagana is the improvised dialogue. Though the narrative idea is known, the performers improvise on the set of dialogues, debates, and interactions during the performance (Ashton1969 and Kāranta 1997). The performers engage in discussions on philosophy or engage in debates on theological or ethical matters from their perspective, with consideration of the story at hand and the requirements of the audience. The body, in Yakshagana, becomes a carrier of knowledge. Through iconographic gestures or *mudras*[38], fast movements, facial expressions, and varied vocal modulations, the performers convey anything that may be an ethical emotion (*rasa*[39]), cosmological truth, or metaphysical concept (Hegde & Hegde 2022). *Dharma* (righteousness or ethical action), *karma* (causality), *maya*[40] (illusion), and *moksha*[41] (liberation) as philosophical issues are not just articulated in Yakshagana; they are embodied in the actor's body and given expression through performance (Hegde & Hegde 2022). Yakshagana's repertory is rich with episodes dramatizing moral dilemmas, existential struggles, and cosmic myths. These acts make complex philosophical ideas accessible to a wide public who may not be able to read them in written form. Yakshagana conveys philosophical ideas through characters grappling with fate, truth, illusion, and liberation, reflecting *Vedantic, Puranic*[42], and *Bhakti* traditions.

Yakshagana simply cannot be categorised as a 'folk art' or a mere 'entertainment' but as an ongoing, participatory practice of knowledge transmission (Hegde & Hegde 2022). And conversely, Yakshagana tells us that knowledge need not be cast in stone. With each rendition, this knowledge takes shape: it evolves with collective memory, spur-of-the-moment exchanges, and social interactions among community members. Through disciplined

remembering, the creative act of improvisation, and the sensory act of embodied performance, Yakshagana is transformed beyond merely a harbinger of tales into a philosophical investigation and ethical manifestation.

1.4.1 Yakshagana Living Inquiry Through the Mahabharata and Ramayana

Yakshagana is a blend of dance, music, and dialogue with a great deal of improvisation, performed usually throughout the night, based on a story (Ashton 1969 and Hegde & Hegde 2022). In the light of what is regarded as the most significant tradition of aesthetic Indian philosophy (*rasa*[43]*, bhava*[44] *and abhinaya*[45]), it narrates stories by performance rather than through reading text. The performance is anchored by a lead singer, commonly referred to as *Bhagavatha*[46], who introduces the story in conjunction with the actions of the ensemble cast of actors and musicians (Padmanabha & Kumar 2019).

The performances demand wearing of highly ornamented costumes and decorated headgears with paint because actors need to impersonate the characters of the *Mahabharata, Ramayana,* and *Bhagavata Purana* (Ashton, 1969). Music and percussion instruments, namely *chende*[47] and *maddale*[48], establish rhythmic and emotional stimulants within the performance (Soni 2009). Regional variations exist in staging Yakshagana, in that performances in coastal Karnataka tend to vary from those of the interior regions regarding styles of enactment and delivery of dialogues (Kāranta 1997).

1.4.2 Performing the Mahabharata: Ethical Dilemmas on Stage

Most of the performances are from sections of the Mahabharata, which include Yudhishthira's[49] game of dice, Bhima's[50] confrontations, and Karna's[51] loyalty (Matilal 2014 and Narlikar et al. 2023). The actors are characterised and differentiated from one another also through their specific forms of *mudras* (hand gestures or equivalents), facial expressions, and body movements to convey the narrative and each actor's identity (Narlikaret al. 2023). The dialogues are mainly improvised during the storytelling process, giving room for adapting to the audience response and retaining the integrity of the narrative structure. The performance goes on, switching from singing to talking to dancing, with percussion forming the emphasis and movement of dramatic tension. Audiences participate by laughing or applauding, which all dynamically interacts with the performers (Ashton 1969).

1.4.3 Performing the Ramayana: The Aesthetics of Idealism and Suffering

In Yakshagana, some episodes from the Ramayana are taken such as *Sita*[52] being sent into exile by *Rama*[53], abduction by *Ravana*[54] and *Hanuman's*[55] feats (Ashton 1969 and Kāranta 1997). Actors would sing and speak, sometimes switching to acting, vocal modulations, rhythmic stamping, and gesture-in-action, all for expressing emotions and intensity (Hegde & Hegde 2022).

Yakshagana performances generally take place during festivals, temple events, or select gatherings of the community. Costumes, props, and stage arrangements elaborate on the character's roles, while music helps to move along the narrative (Singh 2025). Through these activities, Yakshagana narrates its stories in a community, dramatic environment, thereby transmitting cultural, ethical, and cosmological knowledge orally across generations.

1.5 Analysis and Discussions

1.5.1 Embodied Knowledge: Beyond Text and Story in Yakshagana

Yakshagana is an example of embodied, communal, performative knowledge as it actively challenges the traditional privileging of text or written knowledge. Yakshagana does not passively store stories; it uses the body's voice and gesture as instruments of cognition. The artist conveys dense philosophical, ethical, and metaphysical concepts using seemingly gradual *'mudras'*, stylised body movements, facial expressions, and modulation of voice (Ashton 1969 and Kāranta 1997). These performances indicate that knowledge is lived and enacted in this context and not simply digested intellectually. The way these embodied gestures bring the audience into emotional resonance, laughter, gasps, or actual participation suggests that the knowledge in Yakshagana is co-constructed: understanding itself lies in a relationship- and society-based framework.

Thus, performative epistemology has the strength of understanding that meaning is both situational and dynamic. The kinds of moral and ethical conundrums attached to specific incidents-the exile of Sita by Rama or the gambling of Yudhishthira[56] -depend not only on performers but even on the audience's contextualised responses. Knowledge has thus emerged as a wholly collective and adaptive phenomenon, coloured largely by emotion, communal codes, and the specific circumstances of the performance. Yakshagana, therefore, draws on the Indian philosophical notion that *jnana* (knowledge) is not merely cognitive but also experiential, as in Vedantic[57] and Buddhist[58] perspectives regarding *pratyaksha*, meaning "direct" as the primary mode of understanding (Mohanty 1979 and Gupta 2021).

By foregrounding the embodiment of knowledge, Yakshagana challenges those epistemological propositions in the West that emphasise the documentation and permanence of the text. Not only is the story or dialogue an instrument of knowledge, but they coalesce with the body, voice, and the whole communal experience on the whole. The performance itself is a challenge to learned hierarchies on the teacher-student transmission model and underlines the participatory, affective, and multi-sensory process by which learning is achieved.

1.5.2 Oral Traditions and the Future of Knowledge

By considering Yakshagana as oral and performative knowledge, it exposes the fluid and fragile nature of knowledge compared to written or digital records. Oral knowledge, rather preserved through memory, improvisation, and social interaction against the fixity of text, allows flexibility, contextual adaptation, and innovation (Vansina 1985). In recent times, these traditional embodied forms of knowledge (like Yakshagana and other oral practices) have increasingly faced pressure or marginalisation from modern text-based and digital systems, hence they are often undervalued (Galloway 2009, Martindale et al. 2018 and Mahuika 2019).

Thus, this paper argues that while written and digital media encourage uniformity, abstraction, and permanence, Yakshagana comprises situated understanding, ethical reflection, and communal co-creation. Improvisation, audience response, and changes in narrative details keep the vitality of knowledge, and enable its attunement with present culture, and show that knowledge is a process as much as content.

Moreover, with the decline in oral-based knowledge transmission in the present societies, there is a need to keep these traditions alive. Yakshagana, among oral performance systems, maintains a multivalent, emotive, and culturally, basically, grounded epistemology that cannot be even approximately denoted in written accounts. They show knowledge not only as abstract information but a total coalescing of body, mind, emotion, and community, which sheds rays to different ways of knowing that are still relevant in modern contexts (Walter 2012 and Fuchs 2016).

1.5.3 The Importance of Protecting Oral and Performing Traditions

Yakshagana, as an oral and performative knowledge system, highlights the epistemic value of traditions, depicting the empirical, communal, and adaptive nature of the Indian knowledge system as opposed to the dominant paradigms of text-based learning. In this digital age, we need to protect the oral-based knowledge as it not only conserves cultural heritage but maintains epistemologies that are affective, participatory, and context-sensitive. Threats that arise from digitisation or textual codification are more than practical epistemological. Standardisation and abstraction inherent in writing-digital forms put everything together into a mere erasure of relational, public, and improvisatory aspects of knowledge, reducing rich, lived experience to isolated information (Martindale et al. 2018). The differentiated dynamic knowledge of Yakshagana is generally known to emerge as immediate co-created knowledge involving the skill of the performers and audience responses in terms of the socio-cultural context of the performance. This shows that knowledge is not a static commodity but rather a living process whose definition is very much socially engaged, emotional, and embodied experience. If text and digital media place higher emphasis on abstraction, permanence, and the oral and performative knowledge privileges collective, multisensory, and ethical ways of thinking. It is through emotionally charged participation that Yakshagana shows the ability to impart philosophical understanding, not only through solitary reading or intellectual abstraction (Fuchs 2016 and Padmanabha & Kumar 2019).

Through this paper, we argued that the safeguarding of oral traditions is not only an issue of preservation with motives of nostalgia or cultural identity but one of sustaining epistemic diversity. These knowledge systems place the mode of knowledge transmission (embodied, oral, and communal) as central to the depth, adaptability, and relevance of knowledge itself. Thus, it provides a perspective for a more holistic epistemology where learning is treated as an experience, a relationship, and a transformation, imparting knowledge that cannot be offered by textual or digital modes.

1.6 Conclusion

This study examines Yakshagana as a performing knowledge system in showing the relationship between orality and Indian epistemology. Across Indian philosophical traditions, knowledge has been historically thought not to be just abstract information, codified in texts, but a living, dynamic, and embodied process. And Yakshagana is a realisation of this, that is, from musicality to dialogue, improvisation, and physical enactment, Yakshagana transforms philosophical, ethical, and cosmological ideas into sensory, communal, and performative experiences. The epics, in the context of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* being enacted, allow the performers, as well as the audience, to directly engage with moral dilemmas, metaphysical questions, and ethical tensions. In this manner, Yakshagana establishes that in the Indian knowledge system, knowledge is relational, interactive, and oral in character, which places the centrality of the notion of memory and embodied practices. Knowledge is

not fixed or static; it is enacted, interpreted, and continually renewed through improvisation, communal participation, and the embodied gesture of the performers. For instance, in Yakshagana, ethical and philosophical principles are experienced, not recited-thereby generating a holistic understanding that weaves cognition, emotion, and action together. The dynamic interaction between the performers and audience creates a kind of epistemic third space wherein knowledge is co-created, validated, and experientially internalised. This living, participatory epistemology reinforces the primacy of orality in sustaining both the content and spirit of Indian knowledge systems.

In conclusion, Yakshagana is rightly seen as a site for studying the oral foundation of Indian epistemology. It shows that knowledge is lived, performative, and relational, as well as how oral traditions can sustain, animate, and transmit philosophical thought from one generation to another. Once such traditions are examined, they reinforce the notion that Indian knowledge systems have placed experience, embodiment, and social engagement as the crux of their understanding, a principle that is evidently relevant to the current quests of keeping alive and transmitting culture and philosophy.

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Endnotes

1. Veda (वेद)means “knowledge,” referring to divine revelations perceived by ancient seers (ṛṣis). The Vedas constitute the highest authority in Hindu epistemology and theology
2. *Yakshagana* is a traditional theatre form that combines dance, music, dialogue, costume, and improvisation. Originating in coastal Karnataka, India, it is performed mainly in open-air settings, often through the night, during temple festivals and community gatherings. The performances usually dramatise episodes from the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Puranas*, blending devotion, philosophy, and entertainment.
3. The scholarly definition of "*dharma"* describes it as a central term in Indian religions, meaning law, truth, duty, moral order, or virtuous conduct.
4. “*Karma”* means "action" or "deed" and represents the fundamental law in Indian philosophy by which every action has ethical consequences shaping current and future experiences.
5. Śhruti (श्रुति) "that which is heard." It refers to the most authoritative, ancient religious texts of Hinduism, primarily the four Vedas: Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, Atharvaveda, along with the Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads. Śhruti texts are considered apauruṣeya, meaning "not authored by humans"—the knowledge is viewed as revealed to ancient sages (rishis) and preserved orally before being written down. These works are the foundation of Hindu philosophy and are accepted as the highest authority in most orthodox schools.
6. Smṛti (स्मृति) means "that which is remembered." It refers to a broad category of Hindu literature like the Dharmaśāstras, Purāṇas, Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, and other texts, attributed to human authors, and considered secondary to Śhruti in authority. Smṛti texts elaborate on and interpret the principles found in Śhruti, adapting them for society and everyday practice
7. Śabda Pramāṇa (शब्द प्रमाण) is the concept of "verbal testimony" as a valid source of knowledge. In Indian epistemology, especially Nyāya philosophy, śabda refers to trustworthy verbal testimony—usually from

authoritative texts (traditionally śhruti)—as one of the means (pramāṇas) of attaining genuine knowledge. Thus, śabda pramāṇa means "the authority of words," predominantly those of revealed scriptures.

8. The Vedic tradition refers to India's earliest philosophical and ritual system based on the Vedas, emphasising ṛta (cosmic order), yajña (sacrifice), and śruti (revealed knowledge) as means to realise ultimate truth.
9. Veda (वेद)means "knowledge," referring to divine revelations perceived by ancient seers (ṛṣis). The Vedas constitute the highest authority in Hindu epistemology and theology
10. Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva Veda – The four canonical divisions of Vedic revelation: hymns (Rig), melodies (Sama), rituals (Yajur), and spiritual practices (Atharva), collectively encompassing sacred knowledge.
11. *Apauruṣeya* (अपौरुषेय) is a key Vedic concept denoting that the Vedas are not of human authorship but eternal truths perceived by seers, affirming divine origin and timeless authority.
12. Padapāṭha (पदपाठ) is a Vedic recitation technique preserving phonetic precision by chanting each word separately to safeguard textual integrity.
13. Kramapāṭha (क्रमपाठ) means mnemonic recitation method linking words in pairs to ensure accurate oral transmission of the Vedas.
14. A Sanskrit epic presenting philosophical discourse on dharma, ethics, and the human condition through narrative and dialogue.
15. An epic poem attributed to Vālmīki, illustrating dharma through the moral and spiritual journey of Rāma.
16. "Ancient narratives" integrating cosmology, theology, and philosophy, linking mythic time to ethical and devotional practice.
17. A corpus of texts codifying moral law, social order, and duties, interpreting dharma as both cosmic and social righteousness
18. Pratyakṣa (प्रत्यक्) denotes direct perception, pratyakṣa is knowledge derived through the senses and considered the most immediate and self-evident form of cognition. It forms the empirical basis of Indian theories of knowledge.
19. Anumāna (अनुमान) is reasoning from known to unknown, forming a bridge between perception and conceptual knowledge. It plays a central role in logical analysis and philosophical argumentation.
20. Upamāna (उपमान) translated as comparison or analogy, upamāna involves knowledge gained by recognising similarity between a known and an unknown object, serving as a subtle but significant means of cognition.
21. Pramāṇa refers to the instruments through which truth is known — perception, inference, comparison, and verbal testimony. It underpins Indian epistemology by distinguishing true cognition from illusion.
22. Nyāya means "logic" or "method of reasoning." It refers to one of the six schools of Indian philosophy that focuses on logical analysis, debate, and systematic inquiry. Nyāya emphasises pramāṇas (means of valid knowledge), especially perception, inference, and verbal testimony, to establish truth.
23. Śabda (शब्द) means "verbal testimony," śabda is the transmission of truth through authoritative speech. In Indian epistemology, it validates knowledge derived from trustworthy sources like the Vedas or enlightened teachers.
24. Mīmāṃsā means "inquiry" or "interpretation." It is a philosophical system devoted to understanding the authority of the Vedas, emphasising the eternal and self-valid nature of śabda (word). Mīmāṃsā teaches that Vedic language itself reveals meaning and prescribes righteous action (dharma).
25. Vedānta refers to the philosophical culmination of the Vedas, teaching that knowledge arises when language and direct experience converge. It upholds that śabda (scriptural revelation) and reason must harmonise to reveal ultimate reality
26. Lokavyavahāra means worldly or everyday discourse. It denotes the ordinary realm of communication and experience, seen in Vedānta as parallel to scriptural discourse when grounded in rational, experiential truth.
27. Jñāna (ज्ञान) means knowledge or true understanding. In Indian philosophy, jñāna is not merely intellectual comprehension but transformative realisation, integrating cognition, moral insight, and spiritual awareness that lead to liberation (mokṣa).
28. Mantra (मन्त्र) means a sacred utterance or sound vibration believed to hold spiritual potency. In Vedic and later traditions, mantra functions as both linguistic expression and meditative tool, connecting the practitioner's consciousness with divine truth through repetition and devotion.
29. Yoga (योग) means union or disciplined practice. Philosophically, it refers to the integration of mind, body, and spirit through meditation, ethical conduct, and self-discipline, aiming for realisation of the true self (ātman).
30. Sanskrit (संस्कृत) means "refined" or "perfected." It is the classical language of Indian philosophy, considered sacred due to its phonetic precision and spiritual resonance. In the Vedic worldview, its syllables are seen as carriers of divine energy and truth.
31. Kathakali (कथकली) is a classical dance-drama from Kerala, uniting expressive movement, music, and mythic storytelling. It represents the embodiment of ethical and cosmic principles, transforming spiritual knowledge into visual and emotional experience.
32. Koodiyattam (कूडियाट्टम्) is an ancient Sanskrit theatre tradition of Kerala, recognised as the oldest surviving form of theatre in India. It integrates ritual, performance, and interpretation, expressing philosophical and moral ideas through precise gesture, rhythm, and collective memory.
33. Rāga (राग) means melodic framework or musical mode in Indian classical tradition. Philosophically, it conveys both emotional essence (rasa) and spiritual resonance, linking sound to consciousness and evoking aesthetic experience as a path toward realisation.

34. Bhakti (भक्ति) means devotion or loving participation in the divine. As a philosophical concept, it transforms emotion into spiritual knowledge, bridging the human and divine through surrender, love, and performance as embodied worship.
35. Tattva (तत्त्व) means "principle" or "truth." In Indian philosophy, it denotes the fundamental reality or essence underlying phenomena, explored through art, ritual, and discourse as a means of attaining wisdom about existence and consciousness.
36. A sacred text devoted to Bhakti (devotion) toward Vishnu and Krishna. It unites theology, cosmology, and philosophy, teaching that divine love transcends ritual, leading the devotee toward liberation through devotion and surrender.
37. Prasanga (प्रसंग means "context" or "episode," referring in performance to the narrative framework of Yakshagana. Philosophically, it signifies the interpretive moment in which traditional stories are dynamically re-enacted and reinterpreted through memory and lived experience.
38. Mudrā (मुद्रा) means "gesture" or "seal," it is a symbolic bodily posture used in Indian dance and philosophy.
39. Rasa (रस) means "essence" or "aesthetic flavour," rasa is the emotional experience evoked in art and performance. It bridges aesthetics and philosophy, transforming sensory perception into spiritual insight through empathy and immersion.
40. Māyā (माया) means "illusion" or "appearance," māyā represents the deceptive nature of phenomenal reality. In Vedantic philosophy, it veils ultimate truth, making the transient world seem real, while true knowledge reveals the eternal Self.
41. Mokṣa (मोक्ष) means "liberation," mokṣa is the release from the cycle of birth and death (saṃsāra). It represents the highest goal of human life: the realisation of the self's unity with ultimate reality.
42. Purāṇic (पुराणिक), derived from Purāṇa, means "ancient." Purāṇic thought embodies mythic storytelling as a medium for expressing cosmological, ethical, and metaphysical truths through narratives accessible to the broader community.
43. Rasa (रस) means "essence" or "aesthetic flavour," rasa is a core concept in Indian aesthetics. It represents the emotional experience evoked through art or performance, transforming sensory emotion into spiritual realisation and connecting performer and audience in shared transcendence.
44. Bhāva (भाव) means "emotion," "feeling," or "state of being." In aesthetic philosophy, bhāva is the performer's inner emotion that manifests outwardly as rasa in the audience, forming the vital link between inner consciousness and external expression.
45. Abhinaya (अभिनय) refers to the expressive art of acting or representation. In Nātyaśāstra, it denotes the fourfold means—bodily, verbal, facial, and emotional—by which an actor conveys meaning and evokes rasa.
46. In the context of Yakshagana, Bhagavata is the lead singer and narrator guiding the performance. Philosophically, the term also means "devotee of God," emphasising the role of devotion (bhakti) and narrative voice as spiritual mediation.
47. A traditional cylindrical drum used in Yakshagana and Kerala temple arts. It produces powerful rhythmic patterns that embody energy (śakti) and guide the emotional tempo and intensity of the performance.
48. A barrel-shaped percussion instrument central to Yakshagana. It provides tonal rhythm supporting song and dialogue, representing the interplay between structure and improvisation that mirrors the philosophical harmony of form and spontaneity.
49. The eldest Pāṇḍava, symbol of truth and righteousness. His commitment to dharma and justice often conflicts with worldly pragmatism, revealing the moral depth of ethical choice in the Mahābhārata.
50. Fierce and strong, Bhīma embodies physical power and moral passion. His courage and anger serve dharma, yet his actions often reveal the human struggle between duty and emotion.
51. Tragic and noble, Karna represents loyalty, honour, and fate's irony. Born divine yet denied recognition, his life reflects dharma's complexities and the pain of social exclusion.
52. The consort of Rāma and an embodiment of purity, endurance, and devotion. Sītā symbolises the spiritual ideal of truth and self-sacrifice, representing the soul's unwavering faith amidst trials and the human search for moral integrity.
53. The seventh incarnation of Vishnu, epitomising righteousness (dharma), compassion, and ideal kingship. In philosophical terms, Rāma represents divine order manifested in human form, the harmony of duty and love as the foundation of ethical life.
54. The ten-headed king of Lanka and antagonist in the Rāmāyaṇa. Beyond his villainous role, he symbolises ego, pride, and the bondage of desire—forces that obscure true knowledge and must be overcome for liberation.
55. The devoted servant of Rāma and symbol of strength, loyalty, and faith. In Indian philosophy, Hanumān personifies the unity of devotion (bhakti), knowledge (jñāna), and action (karma), representing the ideal devotee's spiritual discipline and humility.
56. The eldest of the Pāṇḍavas in the Mahābhārata, symbolising justice, truthfulness, and moral introspection. His dilemmas, such as the game of dice, represent the ethical struggles of human existence and the complexity of dharma in worldly life.
57. In Vedānta, pratyakṣa (direct perception) is valued as the immediate awareness of reality, but ultimate knowledge (jñāna) transcends the senses.
58. In Buddhism, pratyakṣa refers to direct, non-conceptual experience free from inference or illusion. It is the foundation of valid cognition (pramāṇa), where insight (vipassanā) reveals phenomena's impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā).

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