

YAKSHAGANA: A MUSICAL DANCE-DRAMA

By
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THOUGH the word *Yakshagana* would mean 'a style of music' what is now understood by the word is a form of musical dance-drama, played in the open air, and so it is called *Bayalata* (open-air drama).

Its traditional form is a very rich one and it has had a few centuries of existence and evolution in an area which is now called the districts of South and North Kanaras and the hinterland of these districts. All this area is a part of Karnataka. But now decadence has set in owing to the imitation of other musical styles and discarding one's own traditional costumes in favour of the modern cinema or drama forms. Hence, it is necessary to understand what its real heritage is.

Its songs are written literature, set to a separate style of music called the *Yakshagana*; hence the name to the drama form also. This musical style is virile and operatic in nature. The drama themes are mostly from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bhagavatha and Puranas. The emotional content is developed through a rhythmic style of dance of its own. Added to this, comes extempore prose dialogues, to enlighten the masses about the story. Since the stories of the epics centre round Gods, *Devas* and *Rakshasas*, its costumes are designed to create a world of fantasy as apart from realism. It is this element that is suffering much, in the hands of the uncultured who do not value the worth of its tradition. Variations of this type of dance-drama are prevalent all over the South, but it is the individualism of each that can contribute the essential elements towards art renaissance.

'Gamak' and 'Tan'

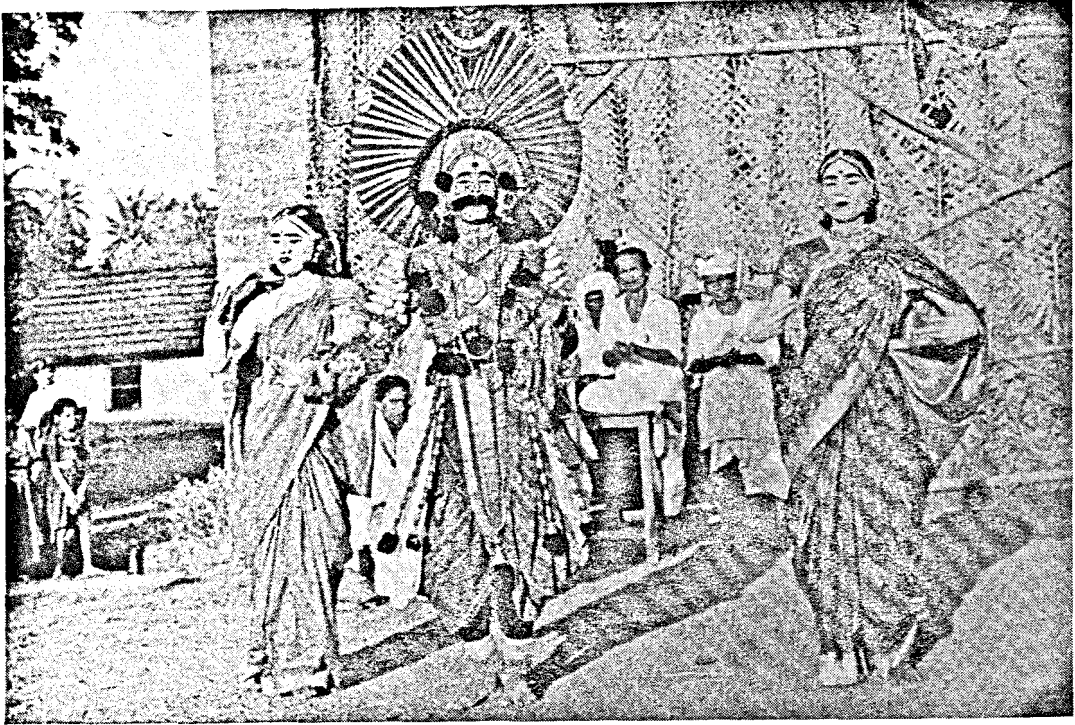
I have heard that *Yakshagana* is prevalent in Andhra also, but till I hear it myself I cannot say whether this and that are the same, for, even in my own area, people have begun to mix up Karnataki and Hindustani styles, creating hybrids without purpose. This is

really killing the very essence of *Yakshagana* styles. Its *Gamak* and *Tan* are different and have been developed to portray the various aspects of dramatic emotions.

We find the earliest reference to this *Yakshagana* in Kannada works of 1105 A. D. and 1185 A. D., though in a disparaging way. It was court music then. Criticisms levelled against it were that it lacked *Pancham* or was in *Pancham*. This was the attribute of the very early Gandhara music. Gandhara was the *shruti* in which it was sung. In one palm-leaf script of 1735 A. D., the playwright has said that he was setting his *Rukmini Swayamvaram* in Gandharva *Gana* instead of *Yakshagana*, like all the other composers. I put the date of the origin of the script to about 1650 A. D.

Major Composers

During the 16th century we find three major composers—Devidasa of Udipi (1640 A. D.), Nagappayya of Dwajapur (modern Koteswar), same period and Subha of Ajapura (modern Brahmavara), who lived in and about 1680 and was a court poet too. Between these three we find palm-leaf scripts of over 30 plays. Nagappayya and Subba are really great names in the field of such compositions. In the 18th century we have one Rama of Karur and another Rama Bhatta of Hattiangadi, Venkata of Pandeshwar. The former is noted for one good play about *Gaya the Gandharva*, and Venkata for his *Karnarjuna*; Rama Bhatta is known for about 20 works. In the next century also we had major poets like Vasudeva Prabhu, Santhayya, Bhima and others. We have at least 150 themes chosen for these plays—called *prasangas*—



A scene from a Yakshagana performance given at the Seminar

and many of them repeated by three or four authors.

Over 100 plays are available in print today. The 17th century plays mention the names of over 100 *Ragas* as belonging to *Yakshagana* and we find very queer *Raga* names that are not to be heard of in Karnatak music, e. g., *Panchagati*, *Gopanite*, *Kore*, *Mechhu*, *Iavalara*, *Koravi*, *Hoovu*, etc. Many names like *Kambhoj*, *Todi*, *Goula*, etc., are common to Karnatak music. Some are Desi names like *Gurjari*, *Sourashtra* and *Nepali*; and some have Hindustani names like *Jangal*, *Savai*, *Pahadi*, *Husseni*, *Jahaj*, etc.

In Earlier Days

Since *Yakshagana* existed as an independent style of music in earlier days, this was possible. But later, it yielded place to *Madyana-grama* and Karnatak music. I believe that this *Yakshagana* style was a direct of *Gandhara grama*. It is even now the ideal to sing it in *Gandhara sruti*, which is a hard job. We do

not find it being cultivated independently as music later, but it has so far survived as the hand-maiden of drama. It is taught and learnt as songs.

These song patterns are remembered and they constitute its essence for, they are the life notes for drama and dance. It is a pity that very few *Bhagavathas* can give us *Raga* definitions of some of the older *Ragas*. Now there is left among us, a great old man of 70 who alone is capable of singing a few of the old *Ragas*. This old man, by name Shri Sheshagiri Kini (Brahmawara), retired after 60 years of stage service, and there is still none to replace him, or help us to realise what we are going to lose by way of past tradition.

The greatness of this style of *Yakshagana* lies in its capacity to render emotions like anger, wonder, joy, and valour, as efficiently as pathos (which all schools of melody can easily render). By imitating other schools of music, it is this richness of *Yakshagana* that is being killed. Meaningfulness in music is being sacrificed for

pleasantness to hear. Can anger ever be pleasant ?

Early Patrons

When did the *Yakshagana* Drama form come into existence? The Keladi kings who were once feudatories of the Vijayanagar kings seem to have been its early patrons. In the years between 1583 and 1630 A. D., one Venkatappa Naik built a *Natakashala* in his Capital at Ikkeri (Shimoga district). Ratnakara Varni, an eminent Kannada poet, in his *Bharathesha Vaibhava*, 1557 A. D., gives us a brief description of the *Yakshagana* dance-drama. To the accompaniment of *Salaga Raga* (*Sarang*), and *Maddale*, the drama characters are introduced as now, one by one, behind a stretched piece of cloth.

There is a short treatise on *Yakshagana* dance-drama, whose earliest script (1754 A. D.) suggests that it was written around 1700 or earlier. But, by then we have had plays in existence. This treatise quotes from *Bharata Natya*, a few *slokas* as to the qualifications of a king, and the audience, etc. It begins with salutations to Ganesha and then to Subramanya. The later God is *Skanda*, Shiva's son, as well as Serpent-God. These attributes are given in its preliminary address. I mention this fact, for the reason, that in the land of our *Yakshagana* are still practises, a rich ritual dance offering to this Serpent-God. It is one of the most interesting, rythmical dances. It is definitely this dance that inspired (amongst many other ritual and nonritual folk dances) our players. Only one who has seen it can appreciate how rich and graceful is this dance. *Yakshagana* fulfilled its function as drama through the medium of language, music and this style of dance. It did not attempt to transgesturise, for which it had extempore prose.

The 'Bhagavatha'

From Sabhalakshana treatise it is clear that the *Bhagavatha* functioned like the Greek Chorus, as the spirit behind the play. The play begins and ends as the *Leela* of Lord Krishna and his brother Balarama. They come during the beginning of the play and set the ball rolling. Then there is *rangapuja* by two female dancers. They dance *lasya*. Then Hanumanayak, or Vidhushak take the reigns.

After the formal courts of Indra, Krishna, Pandavas, or Rama (as the need of the story be) are presented the play proceeds. The liaison officer between the various characters is the *Bhagavatha*.

The themes chosen are mainly for their hero consent. So we have no drama without a battle. Even a *parinaya* or courtship like Meenakshi Kalyana or Subhadra Parinaya, is an excuse for showing the prowess of heroes like Arjun, Karna, Rama or Chitrangada. I have come across only one play *Chandravali* by name written by Nagappayya (1640), that is a *sringara Kavya*. It deals with Chandravali's love for Krishna and there is no battle. The themes being such, the element of battle has received the utmost attention, in our plays, perhaps to the detriment of other elements.

The *Bhagavatha* sings the theme in a high pitch to the accompaniment of an elongated drum or *Maddale* and a pair of cymbals (in some area a gong is used). Formerly *pungi* gave the drone. The actor-dancers too would sing their parts at times, which is a happy affair if the voice is good. The contents of these songs are translated or developed in dialogue form by the characters of the play, and when only one actor is on the stage, then, the *Bhagavatha* becomes his other self.

Palm-Leaf Manuscripts

We have literary-cum-musical compositions by the hundreds. Themes of Vishnu's incarnation, Shiva's incarnation and every *puranic* piece has served our authors. We come across numerous palm-leaf manuscripts of such *Yakshagana* plays all over the southern parts of Karnataka, to which area this form of drama slowly spread in the course of the (18th and 19th) later centuries.

We can find numerous titles, many repeated by later authors. But today, the area in which it is still prevalent, has again narrowed down, to the three districts which I mentioned in the beginning. These plays have mostly come from the tales of the Ramayana, Bhagavatha, or Mahabharatha, and other Puranas. Mostly they are not taken from the Sanskrit originals like Vyasa Bharatha, or Valmiki Ramayana but from numerous Kannada renderings to be found in Kannada.



A scene from a
Yakshagana
performance.

Between the 13th and 18th centuries, we have a good number of Ramayanas. Like Mahabharatha stories were picked up from Kumara Vyasa Bharatha, Jainini Bharatha, Prahallada Bharatha, Turnaga Bharatas or part epics like Vimalancanda's *Krishnarjuna Kalaga* (1685). Bhagavatha of the old school could sing by rote, some 20 to 30 plays each. A play, if big, may last all the night, and, if small, then to four hours, in duration.

Literary Compositions

Its literary composition can be divided into two main sections—the narrative or linking poems—and the poems sung or are presumed to be sung by characters themselves. The former group consists of classical prosody forms like Karela vritha, and all the Kannada Padya jatis—like Dwipadi, tripadi, choupadi, various shatpadis and snagathyas, etc. These Kannada songs were sung to *Talas* also. The other poems are numerous and varied in

pattern, set to definite *Talas* like *Asta*, *Matyai Jampa*, *rupak*, etc., with elaborate *bols* of their own. Even today we can witness something like 40 different plays in our area.

The present century poets have also added to the number by repeating old themes. Real new stories are just two or three like *Bharathas* story from Jain sources, the story of *Koti Chennaya* from the local lore of that name.

In earlier days we find that religious literature, songs to be sung at home by women termed as *shobhane* songs, philosophies were also written to *Yakshagana* music.

It is worthwhile to note that its prose rendering was never written down, but uttered then and there, by actors themselves at the spur of the moment. This field has developed as another form of dramatic art in our villages. It is *bayalata*, minus dance, minus costume, but played sitting.

Large credit for the recreation of the *Yakshagana* fantasy, should go to our ancient costume designers. They can beat, in glamour, the costumes of Bali or Siam. In the districts of Kanara and Shimoga live a class of craftsmen, called *Gudigars* or painters, who are known at present for their wood carvings, and ivory work. They were our old painters. Costumes of this dance-drama and dolls to stage the same play as marionettes, were their creation. They displayed a real creative genius and institutional colour scene which is the life costume design. Let me elaborate this a little further for it is this vital element that is suffering most at the hands of the vulgar and uncultured imitators who also pose as reformers.

Male Costumes

The male costumes can be grouped into two major divisions. The romantic roles like Karna or Arjun or a Ghandharva, and the Demonical roles like Ravan. Romantic roles are colourful and pleasing, and this element is worked out in red, orange, black and gold. The face make-up was plain pink or yellow in olden days when oil-lamps were used to light the stage. The black of the eye and moustache is stressed in. There are set ornaments on the body, clad in either a green bodice or its complementary colour, red. Kings wear a well-designed golden crown. Other roles wear a *Mundas* or turban. It is like a lotus leaf in shape, clothed in red or black, with radiating lines of golden ribbon, that drives one's attention to the face. The size and colour of this turban is again dependant on the glamorous nature of the person. If he is a Gandharva or a Kiratha, it is larger still, and may be slanting frontways or sideways.

The *Dhoti* worn is a type of chequered cloth in orange, red and black that well supports the upper gold and reds. There is trapping round one's waist, and a sail-like cloth of plain red and white at the back. The *Dhoti* is tucked up in such a manner, that the dancer's lower body shows pattern of the romptus shape which is complemented by responsive movements of the hands. The costumes and movements are mutually supporting.

In demonical roles the facial make-up is very intricate. It has some resemblance to Kathakali technique, but is painted by the artist himself, unaided. It is mask-like in appearance, but plastic in use. It creates the

richest element of fantasy. I have seen old people painting such demonical make-up in about ten different ways. Today this is becoming tedious work and is being slowly discarded, or carried out in a haphazard manner. There are persons who imitate other styles partly and that in the border areas. Our demonical roles wear *weistis* below the waist, the same type of chequered cloth worn by romantic roles but having larger squares.

It is only when we come to female roles that the earlier traditions are so completely forgotten, and we find on the stage a Miss Modern walking or dancing along with a Gandharva and Ravana from times of yore. It is so ugly. Recently, I have, with the help of an artist, Shri K. K. Hebbar, who hails from this area, suggested designs that would be glamorous and fit in with other roles.

Mixture of Old and New

Many troupes, and sometimes individual members of the same troupe, enter the stage today with drama costumes. Some appear like cine Krishnas or calendar manufacture's Rama and Sita's minus the proper costumes, their dance looks meaningless. The mixture of old and new is almost grotesque. It is here that the tradition of *bayalata* is extremely rich and it is exactly here that bad taste and perversions have set in. This is not a phase confined to our area alone. Costume improvisations in Kathakali and Bharata Natyam are also wailing over this slippery way; otherwise what meaning is there for a bundle of glass beads over exquisite breastplates in the Kathakali costumes or trappings that lack harmony with movements of the dance in Bharata Natyam?

In the absence of the actual costumes, I request you to study the photographs of these roles, so as to enable you to appreciate my points of view better.

Dance

The *Maddale* or drum work is such as to lend itself to exquisite footwork. It is fairly elaborate and a good dancer needs years of practice. This *nritha* is accompanied by another drum called *Chande* during depiction of valour or battle. There are graceful body flexions and swayings that go to blend with footwork. On the whole, rhythm is its essence. The element

Another scene from the
Yakshagana performance.



of heroism is very well developed in these plays. Though it is quite capable of all other depictions, I do not know why it was not done. Female roles alone portray *lasya* movements, and *Hauma* or clown, its lighter modes. From what one can see of the ritual dance, called *Vaidya* dance, (during Naga worship), that inspired *Yakshagana* dance, it is capable of alround use, and can be one of the most graceful and meaningful of Indian rhythmic dances, as separate from dances that attempt to do the function of language. As such its appeal is universal.

Decor

These are open-air plays hence there is no stage as such. The play takes place in a square of 20 ft. by 20 ft. marked by poles and toran or leaf decoration. On one side the *Bhagavath* stands along with his drummer and drone. From the same side characters come and go. People stand all round the area to witness the play. The dim oil-fed lamps create a sense of illusion, along with the very imaginative nor realistic costumes. By the power of sugges-

tion alone this mode of fantasy is built up. There are no screens, except a piece of red cloth held by human hands and used on occasions to introduce the characters, little by little. They impress their personality on our minds by their dignified dance movements.

Modern gas lamps have taken away much of this illusion. The introduction of brighter lighting, not accompanied by suitable stress in costume and colour, betrays the deficiencies of costumes and ornaments.

Troupes

There are now about a dozen troupes attached to various temples and some troupes have a heritage of 100-150 years. A troupe attached to the Durga Temple at Mandarthi is one. Such old troupes get better patronage from the temple devotees. For people to get redress from illness or calamity, usually vow to these temples that they will offer a performance of *Yakshagana*, if they get over such difficulties. So such troupes are in a better position to maintain tradition. But there are troupes who

care a fig for art, tradition or anything. Catering to low taste, mixing up every variety and novelty, they have brought down their art. If we can pick and choose there are just artists to form 3 or 4 troupes at best, whereas actually there are a dozen or more.

Role of Temples

With our temples coming under religious endowment bodies, the conducting of each troupe has become a money matter. They are auctioned to the highest bidder. He may know nothing of art. Formerly, the temples themselves used to spend money for the renovation of costumes through traditional artists. That is gone now with this new deal of saving a few coppers for the temples.

Those who practice these arts are villagers, mostly farmers. Some have lands to till. It is from the months of December to May that the troupes move out. A troupe will have to move every day a distance of 7-8 miles and stage an all-night performance. Rest comes between midday and evening only, a piteous lot. Since it now costs about Rs. 250-00 for a performance, few people venture to invite them. But formerly a performance was paid for by one man in a village and the entire village enjoyed this benefit. Now they can get only 15 to 20 engagements at best per month. Even in the villages eyes are turned towards the modern cinema and traditional tastes are getting liquidated. So something has to be done before everything is lost.

Already we have lost two other adjuncts of this type of drama, namely the doll-play and the leather doll-play. Both were played to the same music and themes. They died partly for want of appreciation and partly because they imitated the *bayalata*. Now that *bayalata* begins to imitate cinema and *Yakshagana* begins to imitate some other *gana*; their days also are numbered. Till we discover the individuality of each mode of artistic expression, we cannot foster their growth.

No Schools

There are no schools where *Yakshagana* is taught but still there are good *Bhagavaths* who can teach, and do teach, dancers and drummers who can train their disciples. It is not a work that pays them much and no despair has set in. So much about this art tradition.

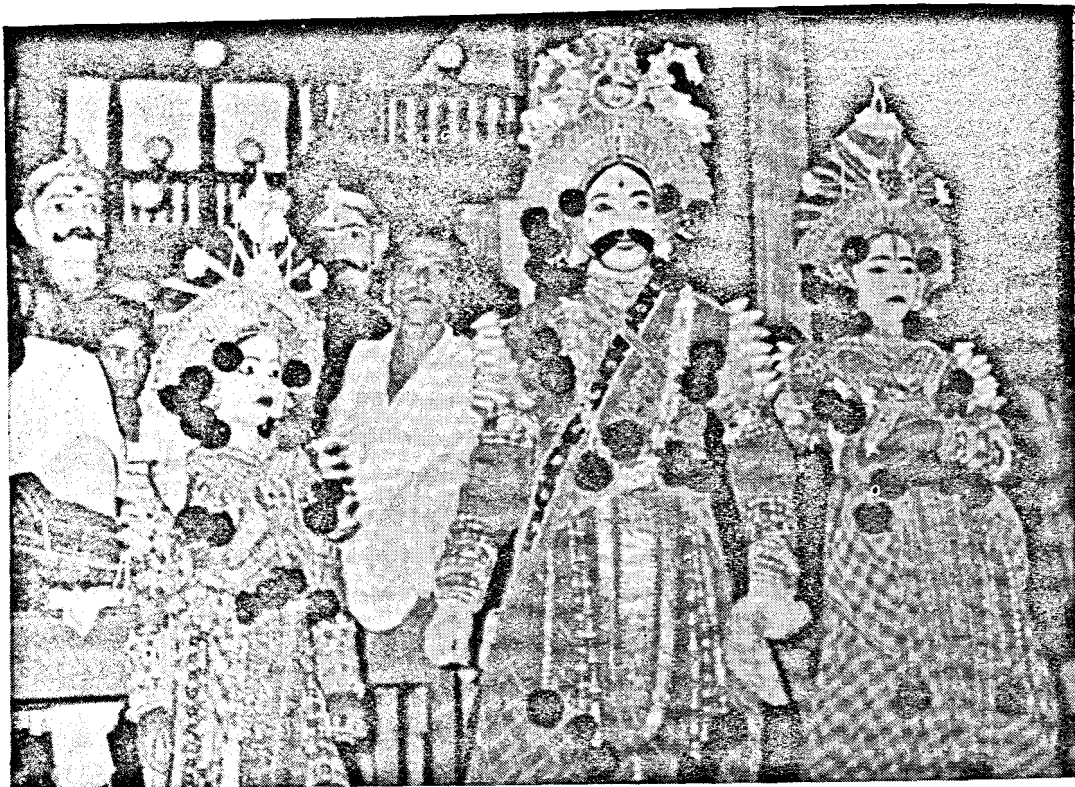
I have given a very rough picture of what it is and how things stand, and now comes the question how to preserve these things, foster them and rejuvenate them. We all know that folk arts are dying out for lack of patronage. It is also true that it is dying out for lack of understanding of its value by the artists themselves.

These arts have to be patronised and the moment such patronage is offered, there are going to be enough stretched palms. Who does not need money? So every one with enough cunning or pull, will manage to become an artist or connoisseur at least for the purpose of knocking off such patronage. People who are chosen to administer this patronage must first of all know what it is that they are patronising. Such groups that have an interest in saving traditions have to be patronised. They too will have to be told, what it is that they are losing, and what it is that is worth saving in their tradition.

If these forms are to be saved, they should be able to exist in the land of their birth. I do not think Bombay or Delhi citizens can foster and save *Yakshagana* from this distance by getting one or two troupes. That may be rare incentive. The main one should come from the land of its birth. On the one hand, educating the people as to the beauty and function of these particular forms of art is a vital need. Without that we will love no art. We may imitate, chase every novelty, but that will never foster great art. We have to be aware of our culture.

Changing Times

Mere tradition alone cannot save our dance drama. Times are changing. But such a glamorous tradition as *Yakshagana* need not fear it. I have seen very simple folk dances of Yugoslavia and Spain, shown in such a grand manner, without discarding its native colour. This type of stagecraft has to be attempted by us also. The tediousness of an 8-hour play has to be abridged to one of not more than three hours. There is much lumber in these plays which can easily be discarded. But all this could be done, by creative minds, by people who know something of stagecraft, choreography, music and painting. The last one is very essential in order to display the fantasy element in drama. To fantasy, the



A scene from a Yakshagana performance given at the Seminar

mass and the class are all children. It can captivate every type of mind.

For arts to survive the need for patronage is there but patronage itself cannot create art. How do we go about to create an atmosphere conducive to art?

Wrong Patronage

Wrong patronage, wrong tastes, wrong pampering are all things that can kill what little artistic tradition we have. So this is a function of educating ourselves.

Pampering of wrong notions and perverse tastes by the public has killed art more than anything else. One has to be cautious about it. Wrong patronage may do enough harm than even lack of patronage. We have to train the ears and eyes of our people to aesthetic

values that are part of our folk traditions. One good production, showing the best in folk drama, will achieve more than a hundred sermons on the topic.

Financial Assistance

Financial assistance to performing troupes and artistes is really needed but before doing it, the agency that undertakes to render such help has to make sure for itself as to the quality of tradition and worth of the artistes to be chosen. Grants for renovation of proper costumes and prizes to good musicians, make-up men and dancers can be awarded. Nowhere breakers of tradition for catering to low taste should be encouraged by such agencies. Tutors who teach music, drumming and dance could also be given some allowance so as to make them feel that they are a wanted class.