

## **Stage lighting through the ages - Theatre to Classical Dance**

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**ABSTRACT:** The widespread use of electrical energy coupled with the rapid progress in innovation and manufacturing of specialized lighting and sound equipments brought about a revolutionary change in the use of sound and lighting equipments in all forms of performing arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the same period performances and presentation styles of music, dance and drama too underwent a metamorphosis in line with the modern times and artistic sensibilities of the audience. The history of stage lightings for theatrical productions in India is less than a century old, more so in case of classical dance productions. While technology is playing a crucial role in 21st century, Stage lighting has come a long way from the journey of necessity to an allied art in the present day.

**Keywords:** Allied art, Classical dance, Lighting equipments, Technology, Theatre.

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Date of Submission: 27-06-2019

Date of acceptance: 13-07-2019

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The history of stage lighting during the period of theatres dates back to the time when electricity as in vogue. If sunlight took care of the village affairs happening during the day, then it's the moonlight that handled the night performances thus giving a serene natural atmosphere. Inside the temples, palaces and also for outdoor performances *Deepa, Diyas* or *Vilakku* using oil as the fuel were used to light up the stage and the performers.

With the advent of electrical power generators, the different kinds of bulbs and lighting fixtures, stage lighting found a strong footing as a complimentary ingredient to stage shows. In the last 70 years manufacturers came out with specialized lighting equipments revolutionizing the stage lighting scenario throughout the world, and Indian performing arts also embraced this technology gradually. This journey of stage lighting gives the glorious picture of the technological advances made during each stage right from natural phenomena to the recent trends.

### **II. EVOLUTION OF STAGE LIGHTING IN TRADITIONAL INDIAN THEATRE**

NatyaSastra, the dramaturgy of Indian classical art deals with all the aspects of performing arts. This work is credited to sage Bharata Muni dated around 200BCE and 200CE. The art of drama emerged out the daily activities of the common man. During the pre-historic period when language was still non-existent it was the body movements which helped in conveying and communication. The tried imitating nature, to meet their daily necessities they made noise. These movements of music, dance, drama which was unknowingly created became part of their life even before language came into existence. Here, the art was created to express the inner feelings and experiences and later it slowly started as medium for entertainment. As the villages came into existence the art of Theatre started getting refined.

The existence of supreme forces drove men to believe about the super natural forces around them which ultimately created the art of worshipping and they followed various rituals to please the supreme. As a part of celebration, small groups of people were formed to perform the rituals which also included actors and performers thus enacting about the nature and the supreme which was the way of thanking the supreme power for all the blessings. Thus theatre came up as a part of ritual which existed throughout, that slowly gave rise to theatre as a professional art.

The theatre in India is an umbrella encompassing all the literature like dance, music, painting, sculpture, mime and so on. The developments in literature of India can be categorized as

1. Sanskrit theatre which is the classical period - The period that follows the norms of Natyasastra up to about 1000A.D is the classical period.
2. Rural theatre which is the traditional period - The tradition which followed the oral pattern of practice during 1000A.D to 1700A.D due to regional difference and political influence can be termed as rural theatre
3. Modern theatre – The theatres during the 19<sup>th</sup> century portrays the emergence of Modern theatre. [1]

## 2.1 Kutiyattam :

Kutiyattam is the ancient living tradition of Sanskrit dramas surviving in Kerala which was written between second and eleventh centuries A.D. Kuti means “combined” and attam is “acting”, thus being the combination of two Dravidian words. This is an oldest performed theatre and the regional form of enacting the Sanskrit drama closely following the rules of Natyasastra. Kutiyattam performances are staged in temple premises known as “Kuttambalams” (Kuttu – acting, Ambalam – temple). These were the special theatres designed for the performance. [2]

The Kuttambalams are built in such a way that the performance will be fully audible from the seating area. The tradition of Kutiyattam follows an indigenous form of illuminating the performing area. A bronze lamp called *Kali-Vilakku* which is five feet tall is kept in front of the stage. This lamp is the primary source of illumination for the performance. Lamp comes with three wicks, one facing the audience and two wicks facing the actor which are lit with coconut oil as in Figure1. The abhinaya is performed in front of the lamp. Imagining the kind of illumination and the temple premises performance it can be said that Kutiyattam would have been an intimate theatre performances because of the proximity of the audience and the performer.



Figure 1

## 2.2 Kathakali

Kathakali is the popular ancient traditional theatre of Kerala. This theatre form emerged during 17th century during the time period of Travancore rulers. This is one of the art form which adheres to aspects of *NatyaSastra*.

The major focus of Kathakali performance is on the Hindu mythology and the epics. Katha refers to “story” and Kali stands for the “play”. The blend of literature, music, dance and drama has propagated this art form as an integral part of that region. The performance that happened in temple premises relied on *Kalivilakku* for illumination. *Kalivilakku* is a huge bronze lamp which has a wide dish of about six inches into which a cloth made wick is dipped in coconut oil. As in Kutiyattam, even here the performances happened in front of this lamp. The natural source of lights were the primary means of illumination when the performances happened during dusk hours.



Figure 2

### 2.3 Yakshagana

Karnataka, has an artistic history with reference to literary, performing & visual arts right from the time of Kadambas, Hoysalas, Chalukyas & Vijayanagar Kings. The word Yakshagana is crowded with many etymologies and meanings. However this theater form is popularly known as Bayalu Ata, Bayalu – open space, Ata – play. [3]

The word Yakshagana occurs in Telugu literature much earlier than in Kannada. Many Telugu prosody works penned between 12th-15th century features Yakshagana. Like any other art form the exact time period is difficult to ascertain. Yakshagana relies heavy on Indian mythological stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavathapuranas. These movements utilized the classical literary forms and performances to propagate their message of devotion thus creating new form by itself in different regions.

According to scholars Yakshagana can be classified to two types:

1. Moodalapaya Yakshagana – includes the eastern areas such as Channarayana Patna and Arsikere taluk of Hassan district, Nagamangala taluk of Mandya district, Turuvekere taluk of Tumkur district & North Karnataka.
2. Paduvlopaya Yakshagana – comprising the western parts of Karnataka & northern parts of Kerala, Dakshina Kannada, Kasargodu, Udupi, Uttara Kannada. [3]

Yakshagana performances usually happens from dusk to dawn. As its dusk hours they make use of natural sources for illuminating the performance area. *Deevatige* or *Panju* is a stick to which a cloth is tied. This cloth is dipped inside oil for about many hours. The cloth is lighted with fire and these *Deevatige* are placed at the corners of the stage.



Figure 3

The glory of the art, its makeup and costumes could be well appreciated in the dim reddish light of oil torch ie *Deevatige* or *Panju* which were the only sources in village. In olden days two torches were held by persons who moved forward and backward in accordance to steps with the performer thus throwing light on the performance. Later on torches (*Panju*) were fixed on either side which slowly got replaced by petromax.

Dr. K.M Raghavanambiar in his *Yakshagana Vilokana* says he read about the use of *Deevatige* (torches soaked in oil) in Yakshagana plays. The use of these torches gives one the feeling of full moon light. These torches were placed all-round the stage to give a uniform lighting throughout the stage. This lighting transports us into a different world. Nambiar says in 1963-64 Yashagana was staged using tube lights. Earlier to tube lights, petromax were used to light up the stage and then with the advent of electricity tube lights & halogen lights made their presence in Yakshagana plays.

Raghavanambiar says DrShivaramaKaranta, eminent writer & Yakshagana scholar made a strong case for Yakshagana presentations with *Deevatige*. These oil soaked torches would give an earthly effect to the stage which had the natural starlit sky as a natural backdrop. Even when the torches burnt out one after the other after the oil dried out, the remaining torches were sufficient for watching the play since the viewers eyes were well gradually adjusted to the fading lights.

Staging a Yakshagana play in the *Deevatige* lighting has its own antic value & importance. Suchitra Art Academy of Bangalore got these kind of shows staged in Bangalore and the same has been documented by Girish Kasaravalli, the famed film director through a documentary film for Doordarshan.

### III. KARNATAKA PROFESSIONAL THEATRE GROUPS.

The Marathi and Parsi professional companies started staging their dramas in old Mysore area around 1875 A.D. Victoria Parsi Company of MrBaliwala came to Mysore and staged *Indrasabha* and *Gul-e-bhakavali* in Urdu language. Dazzling lighting and scenery backdrops were the highlight. They used colorful pyro techniques to keep the stage colorful. This gave an impetus to local companies to adopt modern technology.[4]

KonnurkarKadasiddeswara Sangeetha NatakaMandali established by Shiva Murthy Swamy in the year 1901 was the first professional theatre group in Karnataka to use electric lights for the stage. They used a power generator to supply uninterrupted power to the stage lights. Marathi theatre was influenced by Parsi theatre due to which Marathi theatre were ahead of Karnataka theatre. So Shiva Swamy brought the generator and used electric lights on the stage, to give a modern touch to Kannada theatre.

Studying about the famous theater movement of Karnataka being the Gubbi Company, their theatrical works disclosed that all of their productions was managed with small kerosene lamps during their initial days. As days passed the same kerosene lamps acquired a new shape which were made to suspend from cans in front of the ground. Special lightings were provided using color match sticks. An interesting way of adding colors to the stage in their production was by using a water dimmer. Water dimmer was in use until 1957. A pot was partly filled with water and salt. Two iron rods connected to small wheel are suspended to it. When wheel turns one rod moves up and other goes down which affects the density if light. One rod is connected to positive of mains and other to the negative. Each rod is connected to light by wires thus creating a dimmer effect. [5]

However an improved dimmer replaced water dimmer in 1960. A zinc wire coils round threefoot cement tubes wherein two ends of wire are connected to positive and negative of mains. A metallic sheet is placed in between the two tubes. A string connects sheet with small wheel. Through two holes in sheet silk cords leads to light. As sheet brushes up and down the tubes the density of light changes thus creating the

dimmer effect. This proves how innovation was added in order to create the effects in order to showcase a performance and how important these effects mattered them for their success of the production.

In the year 1938, GubbiVeerana's professional drama company staged Kurukshetra in which live animals like elephant. Horses were brought on the stage in the war sequence. Also with the help of power generator lighting equipments were used using the then prevalent cinema technique.

IggappaHeggdeyaVivahaPrahasana was the first drama written in Havyaka Brahmin Kannada dialect was written by Suri VenkataramanaShastri 1887. Though there isn't any reference about when it was staged yet this was the socially relevant play written for the amateurs. This led to the growth of modern theatres and amateur drama troupe. The famous among them was ADA (Amateur Dramatic Association) of Bangalore, LDA (Literary Dramatic Association) kalavidaru of Mysore, Kalamandali of Dharwad and so on. It was during 1930's amateur company came into existence. Since professional drama groups were too melodrama type the amateurs had influence of western theatres. Due to which modern Kannada theaters began. [4]

Writers like AdyaRangacharya and T.P Kailasam pursued higher education in England. They experienced modern theatres over there and came back to Karnataka to come up with many social relevant plays.

PrabhatKalavidaru, the famous theatre based company in Bangalore was founded by Sri Gopinath Das during 1930's. They produced and performed many musical ballets with rich recorded music and special light effects. Cinderella, PunyaKoti, MohiniBasmadura are some of their most popular productions. Rajendra T.D who belongs to PrabhatKalavidaru family says, "*As a child he used to be Awed at the grandeur of the drama's put up by the company. Rich stage design, amazing lighting and costumes was something that fascinated me and I enjoyed working at the back stage*". It is noteworthy that the PrabhatKalavidaru trained and groomed light and sound technicians among their troupe members itself.

The quest for the growth led to many inventions and innovations which benefitted the art forms. The influence of theatres has also impacted positively on classical dance styles which slowly started incorporating many facets of theatres.

#### **IV. JOURNEY OF STAGE LIGHTING IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCES**

The origin of different dance forms of India can be traced back to Natyasastra. It is the Natyasastra which lays down the rules for the performing art. The shastra over here becomes the Margi and all the evolution of different styles from it becomes desi. It would not be wrong to say that the Indian classical dance forms ieBhartanaty, Kathak, Mohiniattam, Kuchupudi, Odissi, Kathakali, Manipuri and Sattriya are the desi styles of dance which are basically region specific.

During the devadasi period it is believed that the devadasi were performing a dance ritual which is an offering to the god within the temple premises. The only light available over there was also a Diya in the sanctum. So it is believed that the performance happened within the range of light emitted from diya.

Lakshmi Vishwanathan in her article says "Smt Rukmini Dev Arundale was the Guru of the renaissance". She was the first to incorporate the tradition of dance-drama in South India. Her immense interest opened up to the creativity of forming a Ramayana Series in the format of Dance drama. As she came up with this production she felt the necessity of light designer. Her stay in west had given her tremendous experience with which she hired a light designer Paul Storm who was from Holland to design. This was the first ever attempt of using Stage Lights in a professional way for a classical dance production. [6]

During the same period Sri Udayshankar was equally famous, known for his propagation of Indian dance abroad. His stay in Europe and America introduced him to the western aesthetics of dance presentation. The collaboration with Anna Pavlova in the Krishna-Radha ballet gave him enormous opportunity to understand the techniques behind the choreography and the presentation. Once back in India he adopted these techniques for Indian ballet. He is known for his beautiful designs of Aharya and the use of astute stage sets and lightings. His style of presentation was termed as "Indian Modern Dance Technique" in Newyork times. [7]

Padma Vibhushana Guru KelucharanMahopatra, an exponent of Odissi was not only known for his dance presentations but also for the art of stage techniques he employed. It is said that he learnt the act of mime, singing, choreography, makeup and stage setting under his Guru Mohan Goswami.. It was in the Theatre Company of KalicharanPattnaik where he learnt the art of stage setup including lights and sound. His students in an article mentions that KelucharanMahopatra had immense knowledge regarding the presentation of dance with regard to stage lighting which was incorporated in the dance performances [8]. Sharon Lowen mentions, ProtimaBedi used to say 80% of the success of her performance was due to good lighting and music. [9]

Dr. Maya Rao, the legendary dancer and choreographer went on a Scholarship to Russia during 1950's to undergo immense training in Choreography. She also underwent training in Light designing and sound. Her journey and the influence in choreography both at Russia and India, she adapted the stage design and lighting techniques in all of her choreography works. She was the pioneer in choreographing the dance drama productions in Kathak style which is first of its kind in Bangalore. [10]

## V. CONCLUSION

As years passed the growth of human intellectual craved for the desire to create space for innovation. The invention of electric lights which came out as boon to human life not only comforted one to a better social life but also created a huge expansion in the field of arts. As the performances started moving indoors, artificial lightings became a necessity. Stage lighting being the combination of art and science which flourished out as an important allied and complimentary art form thus giving rise to many instruments used just to create a perfect ambience and to give special effects on the stage. These days many artists have accommodated stage lighting as part of their dance productions to create desired effects on the stage. The use of stage lighting in India started with the professional theater groups which used modern stage lighting to enhance the grandeur of their presentation. This was a pre-cursor to the dance choreographers who started staging thematic productions. The Indian choreographers were also influenced by the western ballet productions which used stage lighting on a big scale to make it aesthetically pleasing. The study of selected dance drama productions and also research on the productions of earlier generation choreographers proves this point.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely indebted to my guide Dr. Shobha Shashikumar, Lecturer in dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences at Jain University who has been my pillar of support throughout. I would like to express my gratitude to Jain University for giving me an opportunity to be a research student and to learn from renowned scholars. I would like to express my gratitude to all my family members and friends for making this the most beautiful journey.

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Rashmi Thaper." Stage lighting through the ages -Theatre to Classical Dance. " *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 24 no. 07, 2019, pp. 52-57.