

Theatre Architecture And Lighting – An Overview

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I. Objective:

The objective of this paper is to find the relevance of *Shastra* texts and other literary sources with regard to theatre architecture and the medium of lighting employed during

II. Scope:

The study is focussed on literary sources that are applicable for classical dance only. The major focus is on understanding the way performances were held and the arrangements made in the ancient times as mentioned in the *Lakshana Grantha* and other literary works.

III. Sources of Data Collection

The primary sources to trace the history in the literary works and *Lakshana Granta* are the books. Authenticated articles, journals, blogs and YouTube channels also helped in adding to the content.

IV. Methodology

The study is exploratory research to understand the literary works and *Lakshana Granta* to know the process followed in the past, its interpretation and relevance to today's times.

V. Analysis:

Drama, which was a day-to-day activity of human life and the world, slowly started taking the centre stage to describe not just the life aspects but also became a medium of knowledge for the lay-man. In India, classical, rural and modern theatres though took birth during different centuries yet they were successful in projecting the daily life of human existence. The history of stage lighting in theatrical plays dates back to olden times when electric power was not yet in vogue. It was the natural source of light, the sun, moon and stars which illuminated the performances.

Using light for performances commenced when the performances were showcased during dusk hours. It was the *diya*, the artificial forms of lights generally used when the performances happened in the temple, palaces or outdoor during the evenings/night. The other, often used source of artificial light was the *deevatige* or the *dondi* where a stick wrapped in cotton cloth was dipped in the oil for several hours and then they were lit. Such sticks were arranged based on the performing arena which threw enough brightness on the artists to make them visible to audience. Later as the technology evolved, petromax or the gas lights started replacing the fire torches. The gas lights managed to emit much brighter light than the former, however every 30 mins it had to be pumped to keep the flame balanced with the invention of electricity, bulbs and tube lights grabbed all the attention. As days passed, the kerosene lamps came into usage and they were suspended from cans in front of the ground. However, in the recent times, the growth of lighting equipments technology and its usage has led to many innovations that helps in creating the desired effect on a production on the stage. Now, Lighting adds so much more to a professional touch and has become an integral to the storytelling.

VI. Treatises evidences on theatre architecture and the medium of lighting

Study of the source books i.e *Lakshana grantas* and other literary works indicate that lighting up the stage with natural sources of light was in vogue since there was no technology of artificial sources of light. While sun, moon and stars were the natural sources of light, artificial sources like lamps and oil-soaked cloth torches in local parlance was the next step in lighting up the stage. The work shall find evidences across different texts to understand the design and usage of lightings for a performance during those time.

According to *Natyashastra* the ancient Indian theatres were well equipped. Chapter three describes how the stage is lit brightly and the lamp is taken around the entire stage before the commencement of the performance. Also, as per Indra's instruction when all the deities were assigned jobs to take care of the theatre during

performances, so were the sun and the moon. But metaphorically speaking, sun and moon being the prime sources of light, it would not be wrong to consider them as the natural source of light for the performance as well, apart from the *diya*. In the description of *Natyamantapa*, Bharata describes the whole hall must be richly decorated with wood work, representing creepers, birds, animals etc. Walls must also be decorated with beautiful paintings. The different types of the dimension of the *Natyamantapa* are also mentioned which gives evidence about the importance of each and every aspect that was given to stage a performance.

Another evidence from the theater built at *Ikkeri* by King Venkatappa in accordance to “*Sivatattvaratnakara*” of Basavaraja, mentions that the theatre was decorated with ivory and sandalwood inlaid with precious stones. The theatre used to be surrounded by garden in order to receive enough light. Also, artificial lighting arrangements were made in the darker portions of the theatre and the entire theatre was beautified with paintings of various themes on wall which looked like the mirror. This gives an idea about how well the planning as undertaken to get enough light on to the stage.

The “*Sangita Cudamani*”, an unpublished work on music also describes that there should be thick and beautiful curtains in the front and there should be two very thin and beautiful curtains looking like thin mist at the back. The first curtain is the front drop which is removed when show begins and the mist like curtain is like a backdrop for the performance.

In the works of “*Samarangana Sutradhara*” of King Bhoja, he talks at length about the architecture. It says the halls for *prekshaka* and *Sangita* should be decorated with pictures of damsels with the gladdened face expression of the danseuses along with their skillful dances and women playing instruments.

In “*Narada Silpa*”, the work by *Narada* talks about the decoration of the theatre and says on the top along the turret beautiful figurins of *gandharvas* must be carved. Another evidence from the Tamil literature “*Silapatthikaram*” of *Illango Adigal*, speaks not just about the light but also its arrangement. It says the lights must be placed in such a way that the shadow of pillars must not be cast on the king or his party or other spectators in the hall. The lights are said to be big and beautiful. *Silapatthikaram* says that the stage must have painted canopy above and the pearl hangings along with other garlands which must beautify the stage.

As *Bharata* mentions that the stage and audience hall must be beautified with carvings and paintings similarly all these texts give us enough evidence about beautification of stage that adds more beauty when the natural light falls on them which in turn elevates the entire performance thus creating a serene and also grand imagery of the actual play. Well, all these evidences give an idea about the existence of well-built theatre in ancient India.

VII. Contemporary time period

Looking back at the journey of performances happening since ancient, it is very clear that enough importance was given not just to the performance but also to the place where it was staged.

When the performances were part of *Nritya Seva*, *devadasi* tradition made use of lamp lights and otherwise even in any temple space there used to be the *Rangabhoga* which was dedicated for *nritya* or *sangita* *seva* only. The space was surrounded by temple architecture, the flowers hanging around along with the fragrance of incense everywhere and the *diya*'s being lit around. The natural light of sun during its rise and set would also penetrate through these sculptures thus creating a pleasant ambience. Parul Shah in his article “Use of Natural Light in the traditional temple performance of Bharatanatyam and Odissi” says temple performances happened in the sunset. Lamps were hung in rows to provide general lighting. He says in Hindu temple the shadows and the rays of the evening light along with the oil lamps and the smoke of incense together illuminated the area. (Waterhouse 1998:140)

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

Even now in the current Sanskrit theatre in Kerala the *Kuttiyatam* performances happening in the *Kuthambalam* are the intimate space but stands out for its architectural beauty, aesthetic ambience and ritualistic significance. The performances happen within the temple premises for many days. The only source of light in the *kuttiyattam* performance is via the lamp i.e *Nilavilakku* where one wick faces the audience, the other two faces the actor during the performance. This way they ensure to cover more of the actors' facial expressions.



Picture Courtesy [Kalamandalam Dr Krishnanedu](#)



Picture Courtesy: [Sri Sajith Vijayan](#)

Similarly, Kathakali, Yakshagana, Puppetry art forms even now make use of simple source of lighting for staging the performance.

From the temples as the performances moved to kings court the whole space was decorated with chandeliers, paintings, wall hangings and so on which again created an atmosphere to stage the performance. With the current proscenium stage in the recent times it can be observed that lot of innovations in using the technology has given birth to decorating the theatre creatively and the impact of light has not failed to attract the audience.

The invention of electricity has led to many technological inventions in day-to-day human life and performing arts is no exception. In earlier days the journey started with the bulbs and tube lights followed by focus lights. These general lights were used in the auditorium for general lighting and even now it can be observed that at many temples premises general focus lighting is used. Creativity in using the lights for dance performance started off in later periods which was an influence from the west. With this usage came the creativity in using the same. However, the theatre groups were much ahead in using lights creatively, some of them are *Konnurkar Kadasiddeswara Sangeetha Nataka Mandali* established by Shiva Murthy Swamy, *Gubbi Company*, *Prabhat Kalavidaru* and so on. This 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.

In earlier times, we had the natural ambience supporting the artists for their performances but during the recent times the blessing theatre architecture or the auditoriums are to an extent creating an illusion and impact on what is being presented thus meeting the objective of the research.

VIII. Conclusion

While studying the history of Indian Classical dance from ancient times to modern era, we gather enough information that *Āhārya* played an important role throughout. The importance given to constructing the theatre space, decorating the theatre beautifully and arranging appropriate lighting systems gives an impetus on how well thought process went behind staging a performance. In recent times, the modern technology i.e in the electricity era has influenced the classical dances so much and thus giving an opportunity for artists to explore the field more creatively .

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