

A Critique of Ancient Indian and Greek Theatre Architecture

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Abstract : The earliest known overseas civilization to come into contact with Indian civilization was the Greek. The communication of two flourishing civilizations of ancient world immensely benefitted and enriched various fields of knowledge, ranging from science to fine arts. The paper attempts to trace if there were some inter-changes of ideas with respect to stage and theatre. The references to the *yavanikā* in the Sanskrit plays and in Na.Śā had made some western thinkers, prominently Keith, to conclude that Indian theatre owe its origin to Greek theatre. As a reaction to this view, many scholars, both western and Indian, had come forward with befitting counter arguments that have demolished the ‘Greek Influence theory’. None the less, we cannot deny similarity of ideas, even if not led by interaction and inter-change of the thoughts, views among the people of two ancient civilizations.

Key-words – theatre, *nāṭya-gr̥ha*, *prekṣā-gr̥ha*, *ranga-pīṭha*, *ranga-mandapam*, *Mattavārani*, orchestra, theatron, skene.

A theatre is a place where people gather to enjoy and experience an art performance, mainly dance, music and drama, etc. It provides a space for the performers to enact their performance and for the audience to experience that enactment. So let us start with the Indian theatre first. The simplest theatre requires cleared area for the performance around which people can stand or sit to view the same. Since earlier times in rural surrounding, the stage is being formed with these simple requirements and people are enjoying the performances with same enthusiasm and fervour as in a well-formed auditorium. But, over the years it developed into a well-thought, planned out and

executed structure, dedicated to the performing arts which takes care of all and sundry requirements of the same. Theatre is not a merely building with four walls and roof but, it speaks of the technical knowledge and ethos of the people and also about moorings with the social milieu. So is the case with the cultures that are under our scrutiny.

The earliest specimen and literature about theatre have been dealt with here for the comparative study and it does not cover the historical development over the ages, since it involves various influences and influxes of ideas at work that metamorphosed with the native culture. In the given condition, it would be difficult to discern out a singular strain of influence.

In case of Indian drama, Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Nā. Śā.) is only surviving literary treasure that we can fall back upon. Though we get stray references here and there in other literature, they do not help to get a clear idea about the Indian theatre and stage as a whole. Bharata calls theatre by various names such as *nāṭya-grha*, *ranga-śālā*, *nāṭya-veśma*, to denote entire play-house.

The second chapter of Nā. Śā. gives detailed information about the plan and construction of the theatre and stage. Its lone and complete commentary named *Abhinava-bhāratī* (Abhi. Bhā) throws illuminating light to get the actual and correct ideas about the concepts dealt with in Nā. Śā. It also makes us aware of the differing views about the same held by his previous and contemporary commentators. The plot of the land on which the play-house is to be constructed must be hard, plain and firm one.¹ It is firstly to be cleared of all shrubs, grass and debris, if any, underneath the ground.²

¹ Nā.Śā. 25.

² Ibid, 26

Shapes of Theatre : We come across very confounding and conflicting statements about the sizes and their names. Sage Bharata states that three types or shapes of theatre-house. They are *Vikṛṣṭa* i.e. rectangular, second is *Caturasra*, i.e. square or all round and third is *Tryasra* i.e. triangular³. He further states that they are of three measures, i.e. *jyeṣṭha*, *madhyam* and *avara* i.e. big, medium and small. Abhinava here records that according to some thinkers, *jyeṣṭha*, *madhyam* and *avara* are the only three types. This is also corroborated by Nā. Śā. itself when it stated that *tryasra* type is called to be of smaller size, the *caturasra* is of middle size and *vikṛṣṭa* is of large size⁴. And according to some other thinkers, each of the earlier enumerated types has these three as sub-types, amounting, in all, to nine.⁵ Abhinava agrees with the later view. Bharata regards the middle-sized play house to be ideal one⁶ and warns not to have a big play-house than those are laid down by him.⁷

Measurement of Theatre : Bharata refers to measurement of *hast* and *danda* to measure out the area. Bharata has given the measurement of each of these three types. He further states that the selection of the proper theatre should be based on the characters of the theme that is going to be presented on the stage. So, if there are heavenly characters like gods, then it should be presented in the bigger play-house of any of the types. If the theme has kings as the main characters, then the theatre should be of medium size and if the rest of the people are involved in the play then it (the theatre)

³ Nā. Śā. II. 8, 25.

⁴ Nā. Śā. II. 14, 26.

⁵ एतान्येव त्रीणि ज्येष्ठादीनि केचित्। अन्ये तु प्रत्येकं त्रित्वमिति नवैतेतऽत्र भेदा इत्याहुः।

एतदेव युक्तम्। Abhi. Bhā on Nā. Śā. II. 8.

⁶ Nā. Śā. 12.

⁷ Ibid, 21.

should be of minor or small size.⁸ In that case the earlier opinion, approved even by Abhinava needs to be rejected where he has given over all nine types of play-house. We need to accept the one statement at the cost of the other. In the first case, we need to suppose so many different play-houses in India so as to suit and accommodate different themes having different characters. Bharata advises that the play-house should not be bigger than this size, otherwise the gestures of the actors may become obscure and indistinct and the dialogues pronounced loudly to reach to the last row may sound hoarse at the end⁹. So, the basic requirement in selection of the theatre is 1) it should suit the story 2) it should not be too large to make action and sound obscure and indistinct or echoing respectively¹⁰.

Lay-out of Play-house : The ideal play-house meant for the mortals is regarded to 64 be *hastas* in length and 32 *hastas* in width (64 hasta X 32 hasta) which turns out to be a middle (*madhyam*) in size and rectangular in shape. Bharata has explained it in detail.

It is Abhinavagupta who states that the theatre should face east direction. Bharata further states that this area should be divided into two equal parts, measuring 32 *hastas* X 32 *hastas* each.

1) **The part on eastern side :** Supposing the entrance of the play-house is on the east direction, the eastern most part of the play-house is meant for the seating arrangement of the spectators or audience. It is called as '*prekṣā-grha*' i.e. an auditorium. Its measurement is laid down to be 32 *hastas* X 32 *hastas*. The arrangement for seating is made of bricks or wood, in rising stairs, each higher by one *hasta* than the lower stair, from the ground

⁸ Nā. Śā. II. 11.

⁹ Ibid, II. 21, 22.

¹⁰ Ibid, 22, 23.

level so that the people sitting in the last row can have an unobstructed view of stage performance¹¹.

2) The part of western side : The area lying on the western side of the auditorium is called by different names such as *ranga-pīṭha*, *ranga-bhumi*, *ranga-mandapam*. It is further divided into two equal parts, each now measuring 16 *hastas* X 16 *hastas*. The extreme western section is called *nepathya-grha* which, now a days, is known as green-room or costume-room or property-room. The scholars are of different opinions about the eastern section on the basis of varied interpretation of the one verse.¹² It has led scholars to further divide the eastern section into two parts. According to Dr. Manmohan Ghosh and Dr. Subba Rao the eastern section forms only one unit and it is known as *ranga-śīrṣa*. According to them *ranga-śīrṣa* and *ranga-pīṭha* both words are interchangeably used by sage Bharata. But according to Abhinavagupta, V. Raghavan and D. R. Mankad *ranga-śīrṣa* and *ranga-pīṭha* are two distinct, equal and adjacent parts of the area of stage. Abhinavagupta states that *ranga-śīrṣa* is to be used by actors for concealing themselves before the stage-entrance and as a piece of stage decoration. It is to be constructed with six pillars (*śad-dāruka*) and in the fifth chapter of Nā. Śā. it is mentioned that the musical instruments are to be kept at *ranga-śīrṣa*. It served as a front stage and as a counterpart of *nepathya-grha* which formed a back-stage. The proper stage where the performance takes place is called as *ranga-pīṭha*.

Bharata further adds one more part to the stage i.e. *Mattavārani*. It is to be constructed on both sides of the stage, i.e. *ranga-pīṭha*. It is taken to mean a balcony, a corridor or enclosure.

¹¹ Ibid, II. 97,98.

¹² Ibid. II. 40.

India's oldest theatre is in the Sitabenga cave at Ramgarh Hill, now in Chhattisgarh state in central India. It was built between 300 and 200 B.C. This is a small theatre carved into the rock at the mouth of a cave facing out over an uncovered area just large enough for a small temporary scene building and stage. Its seating is reminiscent of a Greek odeum. The second oldest theatre in India is in the Udayagiri-Khandagiri hills of Orissa state. It was built sometime between 200 and 50 B.C. and it includes a large scene building, with an upper stage, cut into the rock. The seating area, however, was of wood, only some marks in the stone, where support beams were likely held in place, survive. These theatres lie well outside the area occupied by the armies of Alexander the Great in 325 B.C. and must either have been the result of the Indo-Greek trade that continued for many years thereafter or reflect a parallel tradition of theatre design.

The Greek Theatre : “*De architectura*“ i.e., *Ten Books on Architecture* is a treatise on architecture by a Roman architect [Marcus Vitruvius Pollio](#) written in 1st century B.C. This text is regarded as the only treatise on architecture to survive from antiquity and hence has been regarded as the first book on architectural theory since the Renaissance. It contains a variety of information on Greek and Roman buildings, as well as prescriptions for the planning and design of the same. Besides the little information that we get from this text, the architectural evidences ranging from 6th century B.C. help us to understand about the Greek theatre construction. From the late 6th century BC to 3rd century BC there was a gradual evolution towards more elaborate theatre structures, but the basic layout of the Greek theatre remained same.

The theatre of the Greeks was built on the slope of a hill, thus securing sufficient elevation for the back row of seats without the enormous sub-structures which the Romans used. If the surface was rocky, semicircles were hewn out, tier above tier, and an excavation was made in the hillside and lined with rows of stone

benches, the steps being often faced with marble, as in the theatre of Dionysus at Athens. The circular pit thus formed was enclosed by a lofty portico and balustraded terrace, and was assigned to the spectators. The part of the theatre meant for the seating arrangement of the spectators was called as 'theatron'.

The auditorium was divided, as with us, into several parts, but the assignment of seats was determined by the rank and social status of the spectator. Thus, the rows nearest the orchestra were set apart for the members of the council, while others were reserved for the general public.

Orchestra - The lowest rows of the '*theatron*' formed a circular shaped area below the front row of seats and was called as '*orchestra*'. This place was assigned to chorus to sing and dance and they from here would interact with the actors on the stage. It was ten or twelve feet below the front row of seats.

In front of the orchestra and on a level with the lowest tier of seats, was the stage, to which flights of steps led from the orchestra, with others leading to chambers below, and known as Charon's stairways; for they were used for the entrance of spectres from the nether world and for the ghostly spirits of the dead.

At the back of the stage there used to be a two or three storied building with its decorated columns and balconies, facing the theatron and corresponding to the dimensions of the orchestra and stage. It was called 'skene'. The stage had five doors, the two were on left and right directions of the stage and the rest three from the skene to the stage through which the actors made their entrances. There was also access to the roof of the skene from behind, so that actors playing gods and other characters could appear on the roof, if needed.

At the extant sites of theatres, there is today little evidence of a skene, i.e. 'scene-building, which was the third basic component of later Greek theatres, so it is assumed that if such a structure existed, it was temporary in nature. The theatre of

Dionysus, built in stone and slightly semi-circular in shape, might have been established on the basis of some other theatre model in those days prevalent elsewhere but this form of theatre-architecture in the following five centuries years became a template for the rest of the theatres. Athens became the site of the first documented indoor theatre, the Odeum of Pericles of about 440 B.C. This was a square building with seating along all four walls and a performance area in the centre. It had a seating capacity of perhaps 4,000 people, though the view of the stage of more than half the audience members would have been obstructed by columns.

Comparative Study and Observations :

- 1) Both the cultures have their dramatic origin or earliest performances essentially linked with religious themes and festivals. In case of Indian theatre, it was *Indra-dhvaja* festival where the first performance was staged and origin by lord Brahaman himself. In case of Greek civilization, the plays were presented in the religious festivals held in the honour of god Dionysos, a patron god of Greek theatre.
- 2) The site for the play-house as ordained by Bharata has to be even, steady, hard and either black or white in colour.¹³ Taking into consideration the measurement of the play-house, it had to be planned at plane or plateau area, where vast, plane expanse can be available. While the archeological findings unfailingly proves that most of the Greek theatres were planned at the slope of a hill, to securing sufficient natural elevation for the back rows of seats so as to save enormous manual construction.
- 3) The Play-house laid down by Bharata is essentially an enclosed house, though an open theatre option might be have been preferred for common subjects in rural area. The First chapter underscores the need of the enclosed house on the basis of anecdote of

¹³ ¹³ NS. II.30.

disturbances created by demons in the first drama production whereas the Greek performances were conducted in open-air. The theatre was such a colossal structure that cannot be roofed. Had even the stage area covered, it could have obstructed the visibility of the spectators sitting at the higher steps.

Besides, the geographical locations might have made Greek people to enjoy the performances in open. Firstly, Greece falls in a Mediterranean region which has a salubrious climate throughout the year. Secondly, it is surrounded by serene and scenic mountainous region which obviously might have made people to take utmost advantage of the same instead of constructing an enclosed structured and decorating it with artificial drawings and pictures as in ancient Indian theatre. Greek architects liked to site their theatres in such places that gave the audience a spectacular view not just of the actors on the stage but also the landscape behind. In contrast to Greece and its surrounding islands, India is a tropical region and hence save few months, the climate is unwholesome. Besides, the reasons given by Bharata with respect to visibility and acoustics favours the closed theatre instead of an open one.

4) The Dramatic theory speaks only of rectangular, square and triangular shapes to be employed in the theatre construction. Shri. Rangacharya Adya thinks *caturasra* to be round or circular, besides being square. In that case there would be four types. *Viṣṇu-dharamottara-purāṇa* (Vi. Dha. Pu.) mentions two types i.e., rectangular and square. Śāradātanaya in his *Bhāva-prakaśana* (Bhā. Pra.) has mentioned one more shape, i. e., circular (*vr̥tta*) in addition to rectangular and square. Bhā. Pra. states different shapes of theatre on the basis of attendees of performance.

5) In case of Greek theatre, it is a huge, colossal structure that is meant for all the themes and characters involved therein. Whereas in ancient Indian theatre the principle of selection of size of theatre on the basis of characters involved therein amount to surmise that either so many theatres of different sizes and shapes were readily

available and which presupposes constructions thereof or the flexible nature of theatre whereby a theatre can be increased or decreased as per requirement of the theme. But, the detailed method of construction with heavy material with permanent location leaves little scope for this second conjecture. In the given case, we have to accept one reading which calls three shapes as themselves representing three sizes and have to solve the problem.

6) The remnants of Greek theatre still stand testimony to its huge seating capacity. It ranges from minimum 500 to 20,000 at one go whereas the Indian theatres catered to a very small group of people as compared with the Greek audiences.

7) In the Indian dramas emotions and sentiments played a very important part in the dramatic presentations. Rather it was considered the very soul of histrionics. Hence, in the dramatic performance, the bodily gesticulations of the emotions with their fine nuances, arousing in the actors in consonance with the sentiment of the theme was very important and the observance the same by the spectators for its fullest appreciation could be possible only in the middle sized play-house as recommended by sage Bharata.

In case of Greek theatre, the masks were used to represent the emotions of the characters which made easier for the audience sitting far away from the stage to discern the same and appreciate the play. Reserving the comments on limitations of masks in capturing the variety of emotions and even the inanimate nature of the mask to understand the feelings of animate character, the distance of between the stage and audience, sitting at far away was compensated by the use of masks and the play was made enjoyable and communicable even to the last spectator.

Truly speaking, the art performance does not require any specific place deliberately designed for it. Any clean and open space to accommodate the spectators is enough to gather the viewers for the performance. But, the construction, specifically

devoted to the art performances shows the proclivity of the society towards the repeated organization and appreciation of such performances besides specialization in architectural skills. The both Indian and Greek civilization have evinced the same by writing on and building such play houses. It provided the best conditions for the viewers to enjoy such theatrical performances and also helped the actors to give full expression to their art. The play-house construction of Greek seems to have almost no influence on the Indian theatre construction as is depicted in Nā.Śā. and also, the curtain has no pivotal role in the stage craft of Greek histrionics. If at all India was to be influenced by Greeks then India would have imbibed the concept of tragedy or the stage architecture that allows many people to enjoy the performance at one go. But no such influence is visible. Hence, we can discern that both the civilizations were standing in true sense on two different continents and islands, away from and uninfluenced by each other and yet firmly rooted to their respective cultural and social ethos.

Abbreviations:

Bhāva-prakaśana - Bhā. Pra.

Nāṭyaśāstra - Nā. Śā.

Viṣṇu-dharamottara-purāṇa - Vi. Dha. Pu.

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