

Indian performance spaces in texts, with a special focus on Natyasastra

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ABSTRACT

In the absence of extant spaces, the nature of theatres in the Indian subcontinent can only be learned through treatises on dramaturgy and dance. From the available textual resources, it can be assumed that these performance spaces were almost always linked to palaces or as being adjacent to temples. In both cases, the role of the king as a patron was extremely important for the art of theatre to flourish. The first complete description of a theatre is seen in the Natyasastra of Bharatamuni. In its extensive descriptions, one gathers that Sanskrit built theatre was elaborate and systematically designed. This is followed by numerous others through the millennia. However, the essential description of the structure never drastically varied in content or significantly adds to the corpus of details provided in the Natyasastra. The structural details that Bharata's theatres present indicate that an extensive understanding of built forms both as temporary structures and built-for-performance spaces was prevalent. It also tells us that these spaces were popular and part of Sanskrit theatre presentations. As such following a brief mention of the different types of theatres as mentioned in texts on drama, dance, and architecture, this article looks at how the Natyagriha of the Natyasastra has been described, to look at how the theatre was adapted to Sanskrit drama.

Keyword: - Natyasastra, Natyagriha, Prekshaka, Ranga

1. INTRODUCTION

The early references to dancing in the Indian texts locate the dancer in a secular setting as suitable for amusement and entertainment. At times they are revered as being auspicious and the center of every social activity while in others it is easy to detect the mercenary and in-disciplinary status accorded to them. From being considered as elements on the margins whose practices need to be censured like mentioned in the Kautilya's description, a built form was perhaps needed to secure the traditions - duplicating the sentiments of many scholars and cultures who have equated civilization with permanence. It must be noted that the theatre building in India has rarely been discussed as an independent built structure. From the available textual resources, it can be assumed that the performance spaces were almost always linked to palaces or as being adjacent to temples. In the absence of extant structures, one can only learn about them through texts. Briefly, some texts where theatre spaces for both dance and drama are found include

1. The Natyasastra (200 BC- 200 CE) in which we find a description of the 3 types of theatre viz the *vikrsta*, the *caturasra*, and *tryasra*. Each of these is further classified according to size into small, medium, and large. Bharata, the author recommends the middle-sized for its acoustic properties. A detailed description of this is taken up later in this article

2. The Vishnudharmottara (4-6th Cent CE): According to this text, Natya or drama proper must only be presented in a theatre. It describes only two types of theatres, the rectangular and the square. It specifies the dimensions of the square theatre as 16 X 16 yards and it says it should neither be too small nor too big; for there would be congestion in a small one and the show would become indistinct in a big one. The text being corrupt and the measurement given here for a rectangular theatre is not clear. This work does not mention the triangular theatre.
3. Narada's Sangitamakaranda (11 – 12th Cent CE) mentions only the square theatre. It gives a new measurement of the square theatre as 48 X 48 yards. This would be a large theatre according to Bharata. It also states that the centre should contain a raised platform of the twelve-yard square for the King's seat. The theatre building itself is to have four gates to it. Narada adds that the *natyasala* or the theater must be richly painted with the eighty-four bandhas mentioned in the Kamasastra, or more likely those of the Natyasastra,s
4. Saradatanaya (1175-1250 CE) in his Bhavaprakasa, describes three types of theatres for the king, the square, triangular, and the Circular in place of the rectangular. He opines that the king should have all three types in his palace, each for a particular kind of dance and audience.
 - The Square - the audience for this consisted of the king, the courtesans, ministers, and merchants, commander of the army, friends and the king's sons. Here all sorts of dance and music could be conducted.
 - The circular of the *Vritta* - He assigns to the circular theatre only the *chitra* variety of the *misra* dance i.e., the style in which both *marga* and *desi* are mixed. The audience in this theatre should be only men, having besides the king, the proprietors of other theatres - *para-mantapikas*, and the chief citizens.
 - The Triangular - In the triangular, the audience includes the king and the sacrificial priests, the preceptors, the king's harem, and the chief queen. The dance conducted in this theatre should be of the *marga* style only
5. Nritta Ratnavali (13th cent): it is in this text that we find an elaboration on stage space again. For the dimensions of the stage Jayanna (the author) repeats the ones stated by Bharata. However, he clarifies the placement of the *raṅgaśīrṣa*, the distance of the King's seat from it, the lengths of the curtains and other such minute details.

Besides these, texts such as Sivatatvaratnakara of Basavaraja and Sangita Chudamani talk of the grandeur of built theatre spaces, and details such as the placement of *yavanika* (curtains) and the forms of dance that are to be performed in them.

Similarly, the compendiums on architecture and Silapasastra too dwell on theatre architecture

1. The Samarangana Sutradhara (1000–1055 CE). of King Bhoja, a comprehensive work treating the architecture of palaces and other buildings describes the theatre - '*Gandharva Vesma*,' should be constructed in the southern quarter of the palace. It states that '*preksha*' and '*sangita*,' (drama and dance) are witnessed in it. It adds that the space should be decorated with pictures of damsels with the dance expression called '*mudita*'-gladdened face,' and of women playing various instruments.

2. The tsana Siva Guru Deva Paddhati \sana Guru Deva, a big work on 'sivagama,' temple- architecture, 'murti lakshana', etc., gives a small and obscure description of the 'prekshagriha' - the place for a dramatic presentation.

2. Natyagriha of Natyasastra

The seminal work on dramaturgy the Natyasastra of Bharata Muni (200 B. CE – 200 CE) is verily the oldest and most exhaustive compendium on theatrical practices. It establishes a paradigm of practice that is highly gestural and evolved. Little is known about its author(s) but the practices it describes are viewed as being representative of a pan-Indian version of the 'classicalized' form of theatre.

In it, built edifices for the performance of plays and the ritual practices associated with the construction of the theatre are elaborately discussed. The description below attends to the construction and the organization of spaces as described in the text. Bharata, the author primarily calls the performance space, *ranga* (throughout the text, the space of performance is referenced by many names such as *Rangapitha*, *ranga sirsa*, *mandapa*, *ranga mandapa*, *Natyamandapa*, and *vedi*) and the chapter associated with it, the *Prekshagrha*. The origin of the built structure according to Natyasastra is ordained by Brahma and is occasioned to protect performance from obstacles. As such, divine and semi-divine beings are entrusted with the responsibility of keeping the entire structure from *vighnas* or obstacles. For example, the understructure is guarded by the gods of the nether world while the superstructure by others. In contrast to popular opinion that the *ranga* was probably the least important aspect of *Natya*, it is interesting that the description of the playhouse and its construction find a place at the very beginning of the treatise. It posits that the production of the drama begins with the construction of the playhouse. [1]

Natyagriha and its Types: *Nātyagriha* is the formal constructed space of performance described by Bharata. These were wooden 'play-houses' enclosed within brick walls. Akin to the modern theatre, it has the stage proper delineated as the *Ranga sirsa* and *Rangapitha*, the green room or the *nepathya*, additional stage spaces such as the *Mattavarani*, and the *Prekshagrha* or the space for assembly.

The text describes 3 types of theatre viz the *vikrsta*- rectangular, the *caturasra*- square, and *tryasra* – triangular. Each of these is further classified according to sizes of small – *kanista*, medium- *madhyama*, and large- *jyeshtha*. Measuring successively 108, 64, or 32 hastas or danda. (4 hastas equal a danda) The number of possible theatres thus becomes 18.

The texts clarify that the largest of these play-houses is for the *acts* of the Devas, the middle-sized for kings, and the small one for commoners. Raghavan suggests that this is for *rupakas* where the monologue such as Bhana and plays in which ordinary men and women are characters ought to be performed. [2]

Bharata goes on to describe the construction of the *Vikrsta Madhya* type, pronouncing it to be the most suitable. He states that the technique of *Natya* as codified in the *Natyasastra* is suitable or is best presented in medium-sized auditoriums as the audience can perceive the expressions only in them. The play-house stage was built following a specific grid, with areas roughly corresponding to the front- and back-stage of the modern proscenium, and with squares, replicating the *vastu*¹ squares. The unit size of each grid was 8 hasta x 8 hasta and all areas were multiples of that single unit, each marked by four pillars.

The middle-sized rectangular theatre measures 64x32 hastas and is divided into 2 equal halves i.e., the auditorium and the stage. The stage is again divided into 2 parts of the *Nepathya* or the green room and the stage proper. This stage is divided into 2 halves, i.e. *ranga sirsa*- stage rear, *Rangapitha* stage front. The *mattavarani* – are located on either side of the stage.

The **Rangapitha** was the place where the action took place. Located at the centre of the structure, it was accessible from the Ranga Sirsa as well as the *Mattavarinis* (discussed later). The construction of the interiors began with the raising of the pillars of the *Rangapitha* followed by the *Mattavarinis*. The level of the *Rangapitha* was in all likelihood the plinth level of 1.5 hastas and equal to the first row of seating. The *Rangapitha* is marked by the presence of 4 pillars at its corners, each representing different varnas. The significance of the corners and the centre of the stage are indicated by Bharata's prescriptions which state that different valuable stones ought to be placed under the pillars- each representing a different caste. More importantly, the centre of the *Rangapitha* is identified as the centre of the structure – the *Brahmasthan* under which gold was to be placed.

The *Rangapitha* is also the space, where consecration of deities occurs during the *puja* offered to the structure – the *ranga-devata puja*. In this description, a grid of 9 squares, and measuring 16 *talas* is drawn on the *Rangapitha*. Various deities are installed on this grid in different directions, with the centre being taken by Brahma.

The Rangasirsa. The *Rangasirsa* was the rear end of the stage that led to the *Nepathya* through the 2 doors. The *Ranga Sirsa* in the *Vikrsta* mandapa is higher than the *Rangapitha*, while it was at the same level in the *Caturasra* mandapa. It not only accommodated the musicians but was also the space for entry and exits, as also the place where actors positioned themselves while prepping for their roles. Bharata's theatres were for the presentation of *Natya*. And so the structure Bharata describes, allows not just for seamless movement of actors and musicians, but also multiple utilities for spaces. Bharata states that the *Rangasirsa* should be decorated with wooden figures of elephants, tigers, and snakes, latticed windows, and *Niryuhas* (pegs on the wooden members).

The Mattavarani: These are additional spaces that the *Natyasastra* prescribes on either side of the *Rangapitha*. Structurally, the *Rangapitha* on which action takes place would be better supported by stabilizing elements on either side. Supported by 4 columns, with length equal to that of the *Rangapitha*, the *Mattavaranis* were probably used for certain acting scenarios.

Nepathya: The green room is a part of the main building. The space allocated for this was 16x32 hastas in the *Vikrsta* mandapa and 8 x32 in the *Caturasra* one. 2 doors leading to the *Ranga Sirsa* are indicated. Certain parts of the *purvaranga* ritual were likely performed from the *Nepathya*.

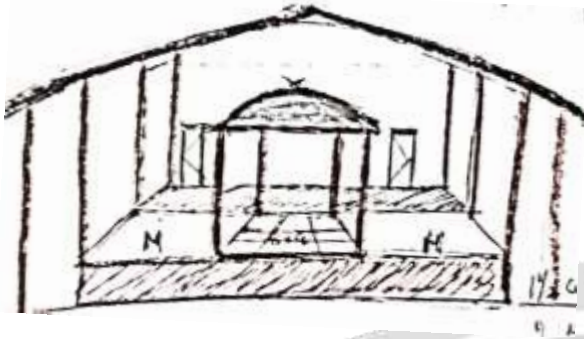
Height of the theatre: Little can be gathered about the height of the entire theatre space or even that of the stage space. The mention of curtain / *yavanika* both in the *Natyasastra* and Sanskrit dramas indicates that there would have been a certain limitation to the vertical frame of the structure and of the visual angle for the audience. Bharata says the shape of the structure was like a *cave*, and that the columns should support the roof^[2] structure. This cave-like structure has been variously imagined as a vaulted structure with an exterior akin to the Sanchi temple [1], or like the Kootambalams with their pyramidal roofs of the much later period.



Pic 1 Soghaura Inscription dated to 3rd c BCE, contains imagery that shows a mandapa-like structure, with a vaulted roof on two levels.

Pic 2 The Lomas Rishi, one of the Barabar Caves, circa 250 BCE, displays the first known Maurya reliefs:

Photo source: Penang, Malaysia: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=68904033>



Pic 3 : A conjectural interpretation of the Natyagriha.

Interiors of the structure: The interiors of the structure Bharata presents profess a combination of materials. The *Rangasirsa* and the wooden columns are decorated with wooden statues and imagery. Apart from the images of animals mentioned earlier, the images of *salabhanjikas*, which are popular in relief work, are to decorate and hide the fasteners that connect the pillars to the roof. The walls are plastered and painted with vines and images of men and women in their amorous acts. Bharata stresses that the surface of the stage should be smooth and decorated with gems and other precious stones.

3. CONCLUSION

The structural details that Bharata's theatres present indicate that an extensive understanding of built forms both as temporary structures and built-for-performance spaces was prevalent. It also tells us that these spaces were popular and part of Sanskrit theater presentations. This is evident in Sanskrit dramas such as the *Malavika Agnimitra* of Kalidasa. This furnishes us the information that the palace of the King had a *prekshakagraha* in which *Malavika's* dance is presented.

It must also be added that the structure of the *Natyagriha* too lent itself to creative imagination and the scenes and became part of the narrative, such as terraces or scenes of divine characters riding down in chariots from the higher levels on stage. The preponderance of the conventions of the stage such as the regulations regarding character entries and exit the usage of certain spaces for the presentation of scenes highlight the extent of stylization and regulations that governed the performance of *Natya*. From the importance accorded to the semiotics and acoustics of the space and in the number of accrements it mentions as necessary (such as images of animals, the lattices etc.) it can be surmised that Sanskrit theatre was not only a complex and highly evolved form of drama but was also developed within the folds of a built form that was elaborately conceived.

4. REFERENCES

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