

# BHARATA'S STAGE IN ACTION

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Goverdhan Panchal

Many contemporary Indian scholars are in broad agreement with Abhinavagupta's (10th cent. A.D.) interpretation of Bharata's *Vikrishta-madhyā* (middle-sized rectangular) theatre which he himself considered to be the best among others in his *Natyashastra* (NS), Ch. II.

In spite of this broad agreement on the important elements of the theatre there is wide difference of opinion among these scholars regarding details.

This is one more attempt to recreate the *Vikrishta-madhyā* theatre. This attempt to interpret the various elements of the theatre is based not only on the interpretation of the text of Chapter II of the *Natyashastra*, as so far has been done, but is also an attempt to interpret them taking into consideration the practical aspects of the theatre as well. It is attempted to show how these elements were used — quoting from the text and giving examples from plays themselves and on the basis of this use, why the elements are interpreted in a particular way. In doing this the prevailing practices of the traditional theatre have also been borne in mind for one cannot forget the fact that in traditional theatre many of the conventions of the classical theatre are still living. Then the materials used for the construction work of this theatre as mentioned by Bharata and the impact of these materials on the architecture of the theatre and on the decorative motifs used for embellishment, have been noted. An attempt is made to trace the sources of some of the elements of the theatre in Buddhist and Jain literature, in early Buddhist architecture and in the early paintings of Ajanta, so that their form and the way they were used may be reconstructed in the light of their historical context. And yet I am conscious that some elements have not been explained as they should have been due to the paucity of material available. Some day, let us hope, more light will be thrown on these.

The *Vikrishta-madhyā* theatre measuring 64 H\* × 32 H had the following acting areas — (the text referred to is M.M. Ghosh's *Natyashastra*, Calcutta, Vol. I & II unless otherwise mentioned):

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\*Hasta is a unit of measurement. 1 Hasta=18".

**RANGA (stage) :**

- \*1. *Rangapeetha* (RP) — the main acting area measuring 16 H × 8 H.
2. *Mattavarani-s* (Matt) — extensions on either side of the RP and further acting areas — 8 H × 8 H each.
3. *Rangasheersha* (RS) — supplementary acting area behind RP and Ms. — 32 H × 8 H.
4. *Vedika* — (V) — platform on RS between the two doors for seating the *Kutap* (orchestra) and also an acting area — 8 H × 8 H.
5. Two doors for the entrances and exits in the stage wall for actors.

Other elements of the stage some of which must have been used during the action of the Play :-

6. *Shadadaruka* — made of six pieces of wood.
7. Pillars (P) on the *Mattavarani-s*.
8. *Shalabhanjikas* (S) — (brackets on pillars).
9. *Nagadantas* (pegs in the shape of serpent's fangs on pillars).
10. Curtains on stage doors — *Pati-Apati* (P).
11. *Yavanika* (Y) — fixed curtain between the RP and *Vedika*.
12. *Chitra-yavanika* — a colourful flexible curtain.
13. Wall (W) at the back of the stage.

**NEPATHYA (dressing rooms) :**

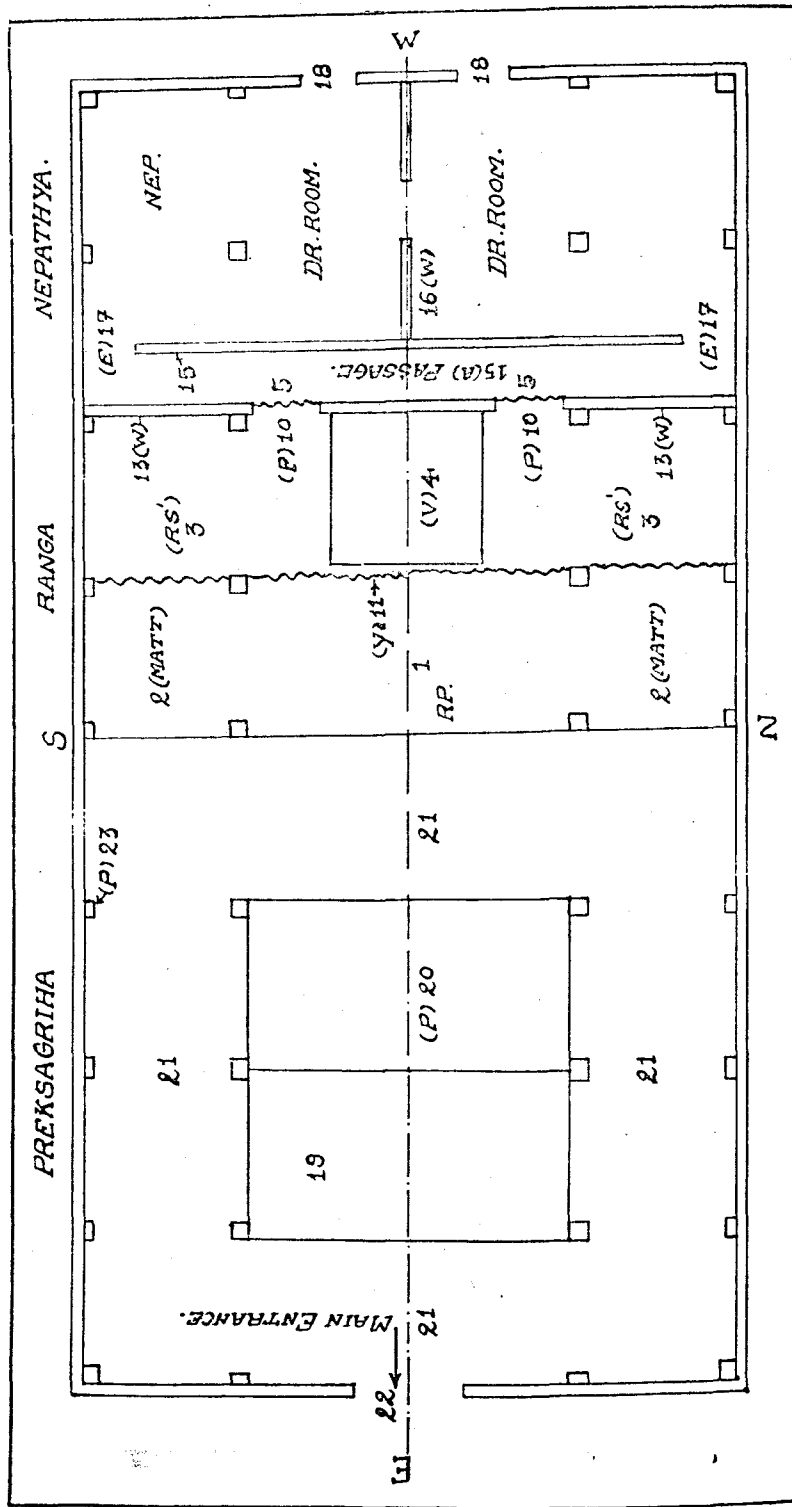
14. *Nepathya* (N) — dressing rooms etc. behind the stage wall. Total area — 32 H × 16 H.
15. Wall inside N.
- 15A. A passage (P) between the stage wall and the inner *Nepathya* wall.
16. Wall (W) separating the male and female dressing rooms.
17. Entrances (E) to the *Nepathya* passage.
18. Doors to the male and female dressing rooms.

**PREKSHAGRIHA (auditorium) :**

19. *Sopanakriti* (tier-form) sitting arrangement.
20. *Pithas* (P) (seats) — on the *Sopanas*.
21. Passages on the sides, front and back of the sitting arrangement.
22. Entrance to the *Prekshagriha*.
23. Pillars in the *Prekshagriha*.
24. *Dwibhoomi* (two levels).
25. *Jala-gavaksha* and *Vatayana* (windows).

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\*The serial Nos. and the letters in brackets, e.g. 1(RP) refer to the particular element in the illustration.



### NATYAMANDAPA (theatre) : Its shape :

#### 26. *Shailguhakara* (cave-like).

This description shows that the *Vikrishta-madhya* theatre of Bharata had several acting areas and other accessory elements which enhanced the functional value of the theatre.

The first and most important acting area was the *Rangapeetha*—1(RP). The *Yavanika* — (Y)11 was behind it, covering the *Vedika* — (V)4. The musicians sat in their respective positions (NS XXXIII, 221) on the *Vedika* long before the performance began and conducted their *Purvaranga* (preliminaries) of tuning their musical instruments and singing certain songs etc. behind the curtain (NS V, 8-11).

The *Prekshakas* (audience) in the palace theatre of the king, the members of his *Antahpur* (harem) and other courtiers settled down in their respective seats — (P)20, according to their status (NS XIII, 218).

The *Yavanika* would be drawn aside by a stagehand and the *Sutradhara* would make his entry by a door e.g. 5, and come to the *Rangapeetha*, and after singing the *Nandi* looking at the *Nepathya* (Shak — 1) he would call the *Nati* (atress — his wife) to come. She would enter by the same door by which he himself had entered the stage. In his dialogue with her he would humour the audience in various ways. Then would subtly introduce the poet and the play to be staged. He would ask the *Nati* to sing something in praise of the appropriate season. She would sing the song herself or it would be sung by a female vocalist on the *Vedika* and the *Nati* would interpret it in *Abhinaya*. Then the *Sutradhara* might draw the attention of the audience by some device to the entry of the main character about to enter by another door while they made their exit by the same door by which they had come (NS XIV, 12).

The *Praveshiki Dhruva* (entry music) indicating the mood of the character and the situation would be sung (NS XXXII — 461), and the character would make his entry by removing the *Pati-Apati* — (P)10, on the door (NS XIII, 2-3). If Dushyanta enters (*Shakuntala*-I, *Prastavana*) he would rush towards the *Rangapeetha* miming the riding on a chariot (NS XIII, 88-92) to catch up with the deer rushing to save its life:

*Tatah pravishati mriganusari sa-sharachapahasto Raja rathena  
Sutashcha (Shak-I.)*

With his charioteer (*Suta*) in front he would rush about with hurried steps on the *Rangapeetha*, might rush to one of the *Mattavaranis*, return and rush to the other *Mattavarani*. Then after establishing the mood of riding on a

chariot they would commence the dialogue as to how the deer had gone out of sight due to the slowing down of the chariot because of the uneven ground. Then they again would rush about in the chariot and when the ground got even they would catch up with the deer; Dushyanta then would aim his arrow and be about to shoot it, when hearing someone frantically shouting from the *Nepathya* not to shoot the *Ashrama* (hermitage) deer he might hesitate as *Vaikhanas* and other *Tapasas* (asectics) rush out by the opposite door-5, and run to the *Mattavarani* opposite the king to be apart from him and yet in full view of him (NS XIV, 14-15).

The chariot would naturally be racing in a zigzag line to indicate covering of long distance (NS XIV-17) and also to indicate avoiding boulders, bushes, trees, etc. The pillars on the *Mattavaranis* would represent these obstacles and the actors would swerve and go round the pillars and rush in and out to avoid them. This would also vary the movements and sustain the interest of the *Prekshakas*. In these movements, the characters — Dushyanta and the Suta would cover the whole stage — *Rangapeetha*, two *Mattavaranis*, both the *Rangasheersha* areas (RS) 3, on either side of the *Vedika* and also perhaps rush on to the *Vedika* itself to indicate high ground and jump off its edges as if now riding in a depression. All these actions would be mimed with characteristic facial expressions, stylized hand gestures, and body postures, while the music in the background would create the appropriate atmosphere with its various instruments.

When *Vaikhanasa* tells them that the *Ashrama* is nearby the king decides to pay a visit and asks the *Suta* to take the chariot there and they mime the speeding of the chariot again:

*Bhuyo rathavegam niropayati.* — (Shak-I)

While on this, I would like to point out some erring interpretations and where and how they err. Some scholars think the RP and RS were two different levels. If this were so it would be obvious what enormous difficulties the levels would create for the actors miming a racing chariot. The two levels would impede the smooth flow of the action. The levels may also compel them to confine their movements on the RP and *Mattavaranis* only tending to create monotonous horizontal movements.

In *Mrichchhakatika* (Act I) also the characters would experience the same difficulties. The *Shakara* and the *Cheta*, his companion who are chasing *Vasantasena*, would experience great difficulties in climbing up and down the levels, and it would particularly be so for an actress, and if in the hurry and flurry an actor or an actress were to miss the step, the situation would be disastrous. In this, one *Mattavarani* may be established as the courtyard of *Charudatta* (*bahya-kakshya*)—and the RS area behind it as the verandah (*madhya kakshya*) and the door behind, the entrance from the house as

Radanika enters from it (*abhyantara kakshya*-NS. XIV-8). The RP, the other *Mattavarani* and the RS area behind it, used by the *Shakara* etc., would indicate different places in the dark street. The entry to the street would be made from the door behind this area, thus making it an extension of the street. Each locale (*kakshya*) would change with the actors walking out of it, and become another locale (NS XIV-3). Later on the other *Mattavarani* could be established as the house of Vasantasena with the RP serving as a neutral zone (*bahya kakshya*) to establish the street in front of her house or serve as a courtyard (*madhya kakshya*) in the scene between Sharvilaka and Madanika-Vasantasena's maid, with Vasantasena watching from the window of the house, (*abhyantara kakshya*). Various other doors to the house and the various floors etc., would naturally be mimed by the *Vidushaka*.

Now for the *Mattavarani* not being on either side of the stage, but in front of the stage plinth —the horizontal long strip of  $32 H \times 1.1/2 H$  facing the *Prekshakas* with the four pillars in diminutive size also on this (Prof. D. Subba Rao — O.I. Baroda Appendix-6, NS. Vol.-I, 1956 Ed.). How purposeless this interpretation of the matt. and the pillars would be in view of what has been said earlier. These pillars were absolutely necessary on the stage itself to create a psychological barrier between two areas to separate them when necessary as in the case of the house of Charudatta in *Matt.* and the street in front of it in the RP and yet allow the flow of the action unimpeded when so required as in the pursuit of Vasantasena sequence, and the flow of action on the whole stage as seen in the case of Dushyanta persuing the deer. In the sequence where Radanika the maid of Charudatta, opens the door (mimes it) of the courtyard with a lamp in her hand, Vasantasena, who is also just outside the door sees her opportunity to slip in the house to save herself from the rogues and she blows out the lamp in the hand of Radanika and slips in (*Mri-I*). She could also use one of the pillars-7(P) in the *Matt.* to hide herself from the pursuing Shakara. Thus, the *Mattavaranis* being on the stage on either side of the RP and the four pillars in each corner of each one of them as per the interpretation of Abhinavagupta is the most practical one. Bharata's text, not only in our time but also by the time of Abhinava had created doubts and misinterpretations. But the text of Bharata is not so ambiguous in this particular case. The confusion has arisen because the practical use of the *Mattavaranis* is not considered at all. And unfortunately there are no references previous to Bharata to them, which has further increased the difficulties. There is hardly any mention of a theatre, not to speak of a detailed account of it. One solitary example of the mention of a theatre that has come to light is that of Raipaseniyasutta, a Jain *Agama* of pre-Bharata times which describes a theatre of huge proportions meant basically for mass-scale dance-ensembles, *Nrityavidhi*. And this work too does not mention *Mattavarani* for the simple reason that the *Mattavarani* is a technical term relating to a particular type of theatre and would be known and mentioned by one such as Bharata only who wrote exclusively about the *Natyamandapa* (theatre) to stage the *Natya* (dance-drama).

The pillars on the *Mattavaranis* also must have performed several functions. Architecturally they supported the roof over the *Ranga* (stage) which was their primary function. But they also seem to have performed other very vital dramatic functions two of which have just been mentioned — that of characters hiding behind them, and that of representing trees or bushes in the opening scene of the deer-pursuit by Dushyanta. A character could lean on a pillar as Vasantasena might have done when pursued by the rogues, or Shakuntala when she pretended to remove the thorn and thus tarry a while to have one more longing look before she made her exit with her friends (Shak-I). Vasavadatta could have performed the *Ananga-pooja* (worship of the god of love) at the base of the pillar imagining it to be an Ashoka tree (*Ratnavali-I*). And Seeta with her dishevelled hair might have leaned against one in her captivity in the *Ashokavatika* of Ravana and might have been surprised to see the ring of her dear Rama suddenly dropped in her lap by Hanumana standing on a *Peethika* (seat) behind the pillar (to represent height) looking at her in amusement. He might have jumped off the *Peethika* catching hold of the *Shalabhanjika* (bracket of the pillar) in his monkeyish prank (*Pratima*). Endless were the dramatic functions they performed and numerous the forms they assumed — these lifeless pillars — like the actors and actresses who changed their *Rupa* (form) and became characters who lived their brief lives on the stage — of gods and goddesses, kings and queens, nymphs, birds. And the pillars lived with them and became a part of their life sharing their joys and sorrows. They might have been thrilled when Seeta saw that familiar ring, or trembled when Ravana struck his mighty fist against them in his demonish anger. When Pururava, mad with grief embraced a creeper thinking it to be his beloved Urvashi, the heavenly nymph, what unseen tears these pillars might have shed at his boundless pain (*Vikram. IV*).

The *Sutradharas* who presented the classical plays of such masters as Bhasa Kalidas Shudraka or Bhavabhuti could not have been indifferent to the limitless possibilities the pillars and the *Shalbhanjikas* or such unnoticeable things as the *Nagadantas* offered. These *Shalbhanjikas* have a chequered history and assumed varied forms during the centuries preceding Bharata and after him. They became solid supports for the beams of the roof as parts of the pillars (Udaigiri cave, 2nd cent. B.C.-Ind. Arch. P. Brown Vol. I, Pl. No. XXV). Or became vivacious playful maidens clasping Ashoka branches with their jingling bangles and bewitching smiles, almost delicately supporting the rounded ends of architraves as on Sanchi *Toranas* (Ind. Arch. P.Br.Pl.XI) or became buxom dames at Bharhut Vedika (railing) pillars (Bharhut-Barua), assuming the *Yakshi* forms wearing hairnets and heavy anklets with faces rather grim befitting the village deities, and later on became freer playful rounded figures almost shaking off their link with the stone — looking at the mirror combing the hair, bathing, playing with the parrot or holding an incense-burner or a lamp-*Yakshis* still, but more like mortal women in their myriad moods making the Mathura railing-pillars come alive.

Thus the *Shalabhanjika* had assumed different forms on religious monuments becoming sometimes functional, sometimes decorative and at other times assumed the mother-goddess image. Could these not have been used more purposefully in a theatre? Their basic function was still to hold the ceiling. But in a theatre everything tended to be purposeful and its dramatic function has already been noted. But to my mind, it fulfilled a further very vital function. The *Shalabhanjika* of the theatre could have been so devised as to hold lamps in its hands, or on its head to shed light on the action going on on the stage. When the plays were staged at night — some were staged in mornings and afternoons — light certainly must have been necessary. Only two types of lights could be used, *Mashals* (flaming torches) or oil lamps made of wood or metal or plain baked earth all of which have been in use in the villages and towns for ages in India. The torches in a theatre would have been too dangerous in this house with its pillars stage and ceiling of wood and flowing costumes. Lamps are definitely mentioned by Bharata to light the stage (NS III, 16; 89-90). These lamps with their gentle flames were safer, not harsh on eyes and definitely pleasing. There could be one lamp on each of the four *Shalabhanjika* of a pillar supporting the main beams. There would thus be several lamps on the four pillars between the Matt. and the RP. On the pilasters touching the walls on either side of the stage more lamps could be placed with perhaps some more in the niches in the back wall of the stage. These many lamps would be necessary for such a large stage of 16Hx32H with several acting areas.

These lamps threw light on the characters from two different angles in any area on the stage and helped to eliminate the shadows which would be cast by lights from one side. Their convenient height also would help. If the lamps were placed only in the side-walls they would hardly make any impact on the characters on the *Rangapeetha*, the most vital area among all others, because the distances would be too great. They would naturally be placed at a height out of the reach of a raised hand though it is quite possible that the lamps in the stage wall in the special niches may have been within the reach of the raised hand and Radanika, the maid of Charudatta's house, might have picked up one of these lamps while going out on that dark night, when the first gentle glow of love lighted the hearts of Charudatta and Vasantasena. *Mirchchhakatika* is a *Prakarana* with *Sringara* as the main Rasa and it could have been staged at night only as Bharata had enjoined (NS-XXVII, 89-97).

To my mind, part of the *Yavanika* also covered off the RS areas behind both *Mattavaranis*. Thus, it would be a long curtain in three separate pieces (Y)11 for ease of operation and flexibility. Each when drawn, could shield off an area of the RS or the *Vedika* and an actor could wait or hide there or rest when tired during actions as Abhinavagupta says (*Sangeet Natak* No. 25).

*Praharis* (door-keepers) when called by the king or queen from their private chambers could enter from behind this *Yavanika*. The shutting



off of the RS area by the *Yavanika* would create a greater sense of intimacy when the *Mattavarani* area is used as a private chamber. Properties immediately required could be placed behind this if the whole stage is not used in a particular scene. In Act VI in *Shakuntala*, Sanumati, an *Apsara* and *Sakhi* (friend) of Menaka is sent by her to see how king Dushyanta is faring after he has refused to accept her daughter Sakuntala. Sanumati mimes her entry by an aerial path and she says, "I shall obtain the information I seek remaining near these two *Udhyana-palikas* (female garden-keepers), concealed behind the *Tiraskarinee*." This *Tiraskarinee* has been translated by M.R. Kale as "magic art" perhaps on the basis of another mention of the same word — *Tiraskarinee* in Act VI where some *Sattva* (ethereal being) with magical powers, who is referred to by the King as "*Tiraskarinee-garvita*" (intoxicated with magical powers) and therefore here the translation of the word would be correct. This *Sattva* turns out to be Matali the charioteer of Indra — the lord of gods and naturally would possess magic powers. Though Sanumati also possessed such power as we saw in her entry by aerial path she does not want to take recourse to that and simply hides behind the *Tiraskarinee* which can appropriately be the curtain here (*Yavanika*). This argument is re-inforced by the fact that in an earlier sentence in the same speech she mentions her mental power to know everything and yet to respect her friend's wishes, prefers to see with her own eyes the condition of the king and hence her hiding behind the curtain (*Tiraskarinee*) which is the correct interpretation here. She could hide behind, possibly half-opened, *Yavanika* of the *Matt.* for example, while the *Udhyana-palikas* are already on the stage; then the Kanchuki would enter by the door opposite and so on.

Kalidas mentions *Tiraskarinee* also in the Act II of *Malvikagnimitram*. Malvika is preparing herself behind the *Tiraskarinee* for her dance test. The king who is infatuated by her and is impatient at the delay in her appearance, wishes his eyes could remove the *Tiraskarinee* covering his beloved. Here the king the queen Parivrajika and others could be sitting in one of the *Mattavaranis*, and the musicians on the opposite side. Malvika could enter from behind the centre *Yavanika* when drawn aside. A play of political intrigue like the *Mudrarakshasa* may provide several examples of hiding behind the *Yavanika*.

One more type of curtain — a flexible one — was also definitely used. Bhavabhuti mentions it by the name of "*Chitra-yavanika*" (a multi-coloured curtain). This was a curtain that could be used on any part of the stage as it was held by two persons in front of the characters about to "enter seated" ( '*Pravishati asanastha*' ) which stage — direction is found in any number of plays. There are other stage-directions in *Shakuntala* itself, for example, in Act IV, where it says "then enters Shakuntala as described" :

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\*The words *Tiraskarini* and *yavanika* are synonymous according to Amarposha.

... *Tatah pravisati yathokta-vyapara saha sakhibhyam Shakuntala.*

Here she is described as entering seated on a "stone" slab with other friends. Her walking in and sitting down on the stone seat which would have to be brought in would create a picture too clumsy to be imagined. She could also not make her entry with all her paraphenalia behind the centre *Yavanika* simply because the *Vedika* would not be able to hold the large stone seat and her friends with several musicians already occupying the area, and further, she would have to begin the scene so far away from the audience leaving a wide open *Rangapeetha* unused for at least sometime. The most sensible thing to do would be to make her enter behind a *Chitra-yavanika* and after all the characters have arranged themselves as required, remove the curtain. This *Chitra-yavanika* was used to create varied effects and moods such as sudden revelation etc. which the central fixed *Yavanika* could not do as effectively as the mobile *Chitra-yavanika*. (See *Sangeet Natak*, No. 25).

The two fixed type of curtains might have rings stitched on their upper edge, and in the case of *Pati* or *Apati* (both words are used by Bharata and the play-wrights) they could be hung on the doors by means of a tight rope, passing through the rings which could be tied on the *Nagadantas* (pegs) mentioned by Bharata (NS II. 79, O.I. Baroda). The *Nagadantas* would be fixed on the door frames. The centre curtain (*Yavanika*) could also be fixed in a similar manner behind the back pillars of the *Mattavaranis*.

... The two doors-5, in the stage wall behind the RS-13(W), were the only entries and exits for the characters. On these were curtains (*Pati-Apati*). The handling of these curtains was done in several ways to create specific effects. For dignified entries they would naturally be drawn aside by a stagehand. In excessive joy, sorrow and anger the *Pati* was flung aside (NS XXXII-470) by the character himself (*Shak*-IV, VI). There are innumerable examples of "*Patakshepa*" or "*Apatikshepa*" entries in many a play. Sometimes even half entries were made. In this case, perhaps the character held the door curtain — *Pati* — with one hand and peeped in and immediately withdrew to the *Nepathy a* after listening to what was addressed to him or her.

But the other three *Nagadantas* visible to the audience could be used during the action. Hand properties brought on the stage could be hung on them. Among such properties could be quivers and the bows (NS — XXIII 124) swords *Uttariya* (upper garment) *Ushnisha* (head-dress) garlands and so on. Instead of putting them here and there which might obstruct the action, it would be convenient to hang them on *Nagadantas* and thus temperarily remove them and use them again when required. These *Nagadantas* could be at a particular height to make them purposeful during action.

Among the other stage-properties used were the masks, (NS XXIII

128) umbrellas, banners, water-pots etc. (NS—XXIII-156-57). The *Peethikas* (seats) of varying sizes and materials were necessary during the action. These seats were to be arranged according to the social ranks of the users (NS XIII, 206-16). The stage-king's seat would naturally be the highest, largest and most richly decorated or he may use a throne. These could be used during the court scenes or a stool or two in bed chambers scenes. The Stone seat used by Shakuntala has just been mentioned (Act-IV) and characters "entering seated" as in Act VII. Vasantasena asks her maid to give a seat to Sajjalaka (*Charudatta*-IV) and in the same act a seat is offered to Vidushaka. A bed with a character sleeping on it is also mentioned in plays and Bharata also has mentioned the use of a bed (NS XXIV 229).

Pictures of such *Peethikas* can be seen in the earliest caves at Ajanta Nos. IX & X of the 2nd cent. B.C. and bas-reliefs of Sanchi *Torana* pillars also provide some examples.

*Vedika* — 4(V) is an important area at the back of RP. Its height is not mentioned by Bharata but it can be reconstructed. It may not have been more than half a *Hasta* (nine inches) in height as it was sometimes used for action which needed climbing it. If it were higher than suggested its height would impede the action on the RP. It was mainly used for sitting of the *Kutapa* (orchestra) which consisted of eight persons, all sitting in the order prescribed by Bharata. The *Muraja* (*Mridanga*) player sat in the centre at the back of the *Vedika* and he led the orchestra, with the '*Panava*' (a kind of drum) player to his right and the '*Dardara*' (another drum) player to his left. The drum-players sat facing the east. The male singer sat facing the north with the *Veena* player to his left and to his right sat the two flute players. The female vocalist sat facing south (NS XXXIII-221).

The musicians were placed in this central area as music was an integral part of the performance. It was not just played for effect now and then. It had a continuous role.

The eight musicians with their instruments would take up a large part of the *Vedika* space and therefore important scenes involving several characters could not be played conveniently on it. But this certainly did not mean that it was not used at all. Two important scenes have been set in this area by Bhasa. In *Urubhanga* Duryodhana's death is shown here and Dasharatha in *Pratimanataka* (Act I) also dies here. We get the clue of the use of the *Vedika* area from the stage directions of the plays. In the first case — the stage direction says 'The *Yavanika* is drawn' — (*Yavanika staranam karoti*). And in the latter the stage direction mentions the *Kanchuki* drawing the curtain (*Kanchukiyo Yavanika staranam karoti*). This *Yavanika* can only be the centre-*Yavanika* between RP and the *Vedika*. Such vital scenes were played in the centre area so that the scenes could be covered by the *Yavanika*.

But important scenes were not usually laid here because RP was the central area and not the *Vedika*. Bhasa did so for practical reasons. The play *Urubhanga* and the Act-I of *Pratima* end here and the 'dead' characters could walk off when the curtain was drawn. These are the only plays in which the characters die on the stage. The distance between *Vedika* — front and the first seat in the *Prekshagriha* itself was 24 ft. and with the central place where the king or the chief guest sat, it could not be less than 30 ft. (NS XXVII, 74 and 78-79) which was far too great for any subtle expressions to be seen. Bharata's theatre was an intimate theatre and distance did matter much.

The stage doors — 5, were used in two specific ways: in the *Lokadharmi* ('realistic') and in the *Natyadharmi* (conventional). Bharata has mentioned the four *Pravrittis*-local methods of producing plays (NS XIV, 36). The use of doors was definitely conventional in the *Pravrittis*. For example, in the *Dakshinatya* and the *Avanti Pravrittis* the northern door was always used for entries and the southern for the exits, while in the case of *Panchali* and the *Odra-Magadhi Pravrittis* it was the opposite, the southern door being used for the entries and the northern for the exits (NS' XIV 51-52). This clearly showed that the doors were meant merely as entries and exits, and they did not indicate any specific entry into a particular area or a building. In other words, they did not indicate any palace gate or house door or entrance to an Ashrama etc. They were not to be extensions of any locales. They were simply entries or exits to or from the stage. Further when a character was already on the stage and had to enter the door of a specific locale he had to mime it to establish it and the stage door had no part to play in this. It was just an entry to the stage.

Thus the door to the Ashrama entered by king Dushyanta had to be established on the stage before entering it. He takes a few steps, looks as if it is the Ashrama door and then enters (*Shak-I*). Sometimes a door and the area inside would have to be established by words as is done by the *Sutradhara* in the *Mrichchhakatika* because he is already on the stage.

He says after walking about on the stage "This is my house, let me enter". He has entered one of the *Matts*. which now becomes the courtyard of his house because he sees some activities such as grinding of the spices and making of flower garlands etc. by maids — all mimed of course.

But it can be argued that all the rules laid down in the *Shastra*, depended upon whether the *Natyadharmi* or *Lokadharmi* style was adopted in staging a play. And it is precisely for such occasions that Bharata has said again and again that whatever is not in the *Shastra* could be taken from the *Loka* (prevailing practices, NS XXXVI — 83). Thus in practice modification of rules was certainly allowed as he himself has said earlier (NS XIV, 12) that exits and entries could be made by the same door.

When the *Sutradhara* calls his wife who is inside the house she naturally enters by the stage-door which clearly becomes an extension of the house through which she goes back when he is in search of a Brahmin to invite him to have food on the occasion of the *Vrata* (vow), walks out of the courtyard of the house he had established and enters another locale (*Kakshya*) by merely taking a few steps (NS XIV-3). He is now in the street talking to Maitreya the *Vidushaka* and friend of Charudatta who has entered by the opposite door.

The *Nepathya* 14(N) behind the stage had the same area as the stage—32 H × 16 H. This naturally had taken into account the special requirements of the theatre. The special requirements were the storage area for the costumes and the properties as well as enough space for the make-up of actors and their costuming. The kings did maintain their own troupes who played on special occasions.

The *Pratimanataka* of Bhasa gives a clue to this. In the beginning of the play a *Pratiharee* (door-keeper) orders the various people concerned to make preparations for the coronation of the crown prince Rama. One of the maids is told by the *Pratiharee* to inform the '*Natakeeyas*' (actresses, NS XXXV-101) — to get ready for a play suitable for the coronation. When later Seeta sees a *Valkala* (bark costume) in the hands of a maid and asks her where she got it from the maid replies that she had asked "the *Nepathya-Palika* to give her some flowers after the show but since she had refused to do so, I have brought this *Valkala* to tease her." Here the word *Nepathya-Palika* (wardrobe-mistress) shows that such a person was necessary to look after the costumes stored in the *Nepathya* wardrobe. Regular troupes of actors and actresses were attached to the royal theatre who used these costumes and along with them other technical personnel such as the *Nepathya-Palika* were necessary for a regular company (*Pratima-I*).

Bharata himself mentions an all-women's troupe attached to the *Antahpur* (harem) to perform for the ladies (NS XXXIV-78, 79; XXXV, 49). Touring companies of actors also must have performed in the palace or people's theatres as competitions were held between various groups and the '*Prashnikas*' (judges) awarded the *Pataka* (flag of victory) to the best troupe (NS' XXVII, 71-72-74).

Kautilya speaks of "*Bahirikas*"—the actors, dancers acrobats etc., to be kept out of the town limits, which also implies travelling companies of dramatic troupes (*Chandragupta Maurya And His Times* — R.K. Mukherji, P-70).

The regular repertory companies naturally needed a large wardrobe and other paraphernalia and a large storage space and so a large *Nepathya* was provided. Then the actors and actresses needed separate dressing rooms. And this would mean that a wall had to be there to divide the large *Nepathya* area into two sections 16(W).

It is very obvious that the *Nepathya* activity should not be directly visible to the *Prekshakas*. The *Pati* on the door cannot totally hide this activity particularly when it is drawn aside for various entries or exits. This means that there must have been another wall (15) to keep off the *Nepathya* noises and sights which would be visible through the stage doors. This wall must have been erected leaving a fairly large passage (15A) at least 6ft. wide between this and the stage wall for easy movement of actors and large properties such as beds etc. The doors in this wall — (E)17 as well as the stage wall — 13(W) must have been large enough — 4ft × 8ft or so for the same reasons.

The two doors or openings in the *Nepathya* wall (E)17 had to be located in such a way that they were outside the sightlines of the *Prekshakas*. These could only be at the either ends of this *Nepathya* passage (15A).

The stage-directions given in the *Anargharaghava* of Murari (8th cent A.D.) lend force to this inference regarding this passage. Here the particular stage-directions repeated several times give clear indication that the sounds were made behind one door and then the other in quick succession. Such sounds would just not be possible if the passage (15A) were not there and the doors opened directly in the *Nepathya* itself.

Fairly large group of actors in the crowd as in *Vadhashtana* (hanging) scene in the *Mrichchhakatika* (Act-X) and the entry of the king with his retinue in *Vikramorvashiya* according to their social ranks (NS XIV, 16) needed a large passage and the racing movements of Dushyanta's chariot could not have been convincing if they were not begun in this passage and continued on the stage as a continuous sequence of movements. The racing chariot could rush out of a door and into the passage cut off from the sight of the *Prekshakas*, continue their sounds of relentless driving of the horses in the passage and race in by the other door on to the stage.

This kind of quick action to flow presupposes a stage with one level of RP and RS — the entire *Ranga* except *Vedika* and also the *Nepathya* floor on the same level. The interpretation by some, that the *Nepathya* was lower than the stage floor or the word *Rangavatarana* meaning descending on the *Ranga* from a higher floor of the *Nepathya* cannot stand scrutiny when the practical aspects of the performance are considered. A theatre is essentially meant for presenting plays where practical considerations are paramount. The literary interpretations have ignored this vital aspect of the stage.

The other elements — *Uha-pratyuha*, *Niryuha-Kuhara*, *Vyala*, *Kapota* (NS II-75) are technical architectural terms concerned, perhaps, with the beautification in the form of mouldings projections etc. of the entire theatre. And the word *Vedika* (NS II-77) mentioned with the word "*Grathita*" (interlaced) also shows this as a motif of railing used as a decorative element in various ways. Such railing-motifs are to be found in the earliest paintings

(Ajanta caves, IX & X and sculptures of Bharhut, Sanchi etc. of 2nd cent. B.C.). The motif might have been used on the front of the stage-plinth, on pillar surfaces, on walls, on the front of *Sopana*-seating or any flat surface that needed to be broken up for decorative embellishment. Such broken surfaces also helped in acoustics. They absorbed sound which on a flat surface would have been reflected back and created echoes. The stage area called *Vedika* (NS II, 95-100), on the RS is a different thing altogether as seen earlier.

*Shadadaruka* is mentioned as an element on the RS. Bharata's theatre was constructed in bricks and wood (NS-II, 91 — "*Ishtaka-darubhih*"). This could be interpreted in three ways — that it was constructed of bricks, or of wood; or of bricks and wood. If the stage were constructed only of wood, then the *Sadadaruka* could be interpreted as a frame made up of six pieces of wood to support the planks on the stage as Subba Rao says (NS — O.I.B. Vol. I, appendix-6). The confusion arises because it is mentioned in connection with the RS but this can be overcome by the fact that such discrepancies are numerous in the text of the NS and the actual term used might have been *Ranga* (stage) instead of the *Rangaseersa* (a specific area). Or, this may also have been some kind of a roofed pavilion on the *Vedika* raised on the six pieces of wood (*shada-daruka*) to re-inforce the quality of acoustics as the musicians sat here.

*Dwibhumi*-19, (NS II 80-82) mentioned in connection with the whole of the *Natyamandapa* ("*Dwibhumir Natyamandapa*"), can be interpreted as the two important parts of the theatre — the two levels of the stage (*Ranga* and *Vedika*) and the two levels (*Sopanas*) in the *Prekshagriha* sitting-arrangement. Bharata has said that the *Vikrishta-madhya* theatre was meant for kings (NS I, 8-11). Here the audience was limited and further, in the kings' theatre (Bharata mentions the king five times in ch. II), no one would be sitting (or appear to be sitting) higher than the king. He sat on a throne and his height with the height of the throne dominated the people even if they were sitting on a higher level at the back. The higher level had to be there for the sake of sightlines because the people of the court sitting at the back would find it impossible to watch the performance with the queens, princesses, and princes, sitting on *Peethikas*-(P) 20, of varying heights along with the king (*Supeetha-dharani-yuktam* NS II, 78-Vol. I, O.I.B.).

Bharata mentions the tiered sitting (*Sopana-kriti*) arrangement when he deals with the Square theatre and therefore the word *Sopanakriti* is related to this Square theatre. This theatre was meant for the common people where this kind of sitting arrangement to accommodate more people and to have better sightlines was absolutely necessary. This type of tiered sitting was not suitable in the king's theatre-*Vikrishta-madhya* as the sitting requirement was entirely different as already noted. Therefore the interpretation of the ("*Sopanakriti Peethakam*" tiered-sitting) for both the types of theatres is illogical. Though it is possible that the *Vikrishta-madhya* type of theatre could also

have been erected for the general public where tiered sitting would have been made.

It seems three different types of theatre are mentioned by Bharata to stage three or more different types of plays—fully developed and complex *Rupakas* such as the *Nataka* and the *Prakaranas* in the palaces and public places. Smaller and one act plays but with larger casts like *Vyayoga*, *Prahasanas* etc. in the *Chaturashra Kaniyas* (small square) theatre and *Bhana* and *Lasyangas* (with only one actor) or *Vithi* (with one or two actors) in the small Triangular theatre. Here only suffice it to say that all the three types of theatres, could be in the palace complex as well as in public places, with two different types of sitting arrangement according to their particular requirements, of public or palace theatres.

The flat monotony of the brick walls was relieved by latticed bull's-eye-shaped small windows\* (*Jala-gavaksha* NS II-77. O.I.S. Baroda) examples of which can be seen at Temple No. 40 at Sanchi (Ind. Arch. Brown-P1.XII-4). This *Jala-gavaksha* in its larger form must also have been used over the main entrance to the *Prekshagriha* and the much smaller ones over the other doors of the *Ranga* and the *Nepathya* as are found in the Karle and other caves of the 1st/2nd cent B.C. (Ind. Arch. P. Brown, Vol. I, pls. XV & XVIII-Fig. 2)

Another type of window, *Vatayana* (NS-II, 80. O.I. Baroda) is also mentioned. This must have been small and latticed and of rectangular shape used horizontally (Ajanta) or vertically (Bhaja cave, facade).

These windows were small and latticed for the simple reason of acoustics. Only gentle breeze would pass through these and therefore would not disturb the speech or the delicate musical notes.

The technique of paintings on the inner walls of the theatre is the same as used in the Ajanta murals. The wall was prepared by applying a plaster — *Bhittilepa*. On this was applied a white very fine butter like plaster-coating, *Sudhakarma* on which were executed the paintings in varied and brilliant colours — *Chitrakarmani* (NS-II, 84, O.I.B.) The motifs used in the paintings of men and women, *Latabhandhas* (NS II 84-85, do) etc. as also the technique of painting and the material of the plaster applied on which the painting was done, are ancient ones as their mention is found in the early Jain and Buddhist literature (Indian Art, V.S. Agrawala).

The paintings and other decorative elements in the woodwork mentioned earlier exude a highly sophisticated culture of a particular time in history and which was at par with the highly developed form of drama and its produc-

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\*The gavaksha is also used as a decorative element in later times.



tion technique which had centuries of evolution behind it. This atmosphere of beauty and sophisticated culture was also reflected on the stage where the gods and the ancient kings, goddesses, queens and the nymphs in their brilliant costumes and ornaments re-lived their ancient lives in the *Natakas* and *Prakaranas* in the theatres of the kings. The *Prāhasanas*, the *Bhanas* and the *Vithis* reflected a different kind of atmosphere, an atmosphere of earthiness and the commoners must have huddled together to witness them in the public theatres.

The cave-like shape of the theatre (NS II, 80) reflected not only the architecture of the time, but also contributed its mite to the actual performance by helping to create the right acoustic quality for the spoken word and musical subtleties. The stage itself must have had a ceiling, and the vault-shaped shell over the auditorium with its U-shaped ribs resting on the beams supported by highly polished and beautifully carved pillars, helped in re-enforcing the acoustics. The two rows of pillars on either side of the walls placed at a distance of 8 *Hastas* from the walls and from each other supported not only the central shell but also the slightly curved roof formed over the inner curved ribs in tune with the central vault shape. The *shlokas* in the Text of NS regarding the pillars seem to be corrupt and hence there is so much confusion in their re-construction based on mere literary interpretations. The present interpretation is based on architectural considerations and the actual examples of the Koottampalams—the Temple Theatres of Kerala,

The brick floor of the *Prkshagriha* (*Kuttima* NS. II, O.I.B.) was plastered and polished white, the whiteness being relieved by precious stones embedded in design forms (NS. II, 80-do). The stage floor brilliantly polished and perfectly plain like the surface of a mirror (NS II, 73-do) must have reflected gently the figures weaving choreographic patterns upon its wooden surface. This method of polishing the floors is an ancient one and is mentioned in the early Jain and Buddhist literature.

Thus the theatre of Bharata not only reflected its time in history and the quintessence of the culture of the country but also actively participated in the action of the play.\*

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Shri GOVERDHAN PANCHAL is Asstt. Professor for Theatre Architecture, Scenic Design and Costume at the National School of Drama, New Delhi. see "Sangeet Natak"-8.

\* The ground plan of the *Viksishtamadhyā* theatre is drawn by Shri Sudhir Kulkarni under the guidance of Shri Panchal.