

TWO EARLY SCULPTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIAN THEATRE

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The *Rigveda*, in its tenth *mandals*, has alluded to the thickening cloud of dust that arose from dancers' feet (X. 72). It seems, encircled by the admiring audiences, *Rigvedic nrutus* performed on the earth under the blue canopy of the sky. We also find a reference to open-air theatrical performance in the *prithavi sukta* of the *Atharvaveda*. The hymn says: 'The earth, on whom, with clamour loud; Men that are mortal sing and dance' (Yashya Gayanti Nritanti Bhymyam Martyah). The entertainment programmes were held in the open for the recreation of the people in Vedic festivals like *saman*. Though Vedic literature is replete with references to the performing artists of various types there is no explicit mention of any kind of theatre building, temporary or permanent. No doubt *yajna mandapas* were used to perform sacrificial rituals in which dance, music and dialogues with appropriate gestures played a definite role. As a part of rituals like *mahavrata*, girls used to dance around the sacrificial fire with pitchers full of water on their heads in the *yajna mandapa*. In the later period performances were held to amuse the people assembled. *Mahabharata* tells us about entertainment programmes held in the *yajna mandapa* on the occasion of *ashvamedha* performed by the Pandavas. In *Harivamsha*, we find *bhadra nata* pleasing the *maharshis* by histrionic skill at the time of *yajna* performed by Vasudeva. A dancing scene is included in the 5th century Gupta relief in the Gwalior Museum depicting various facets of Bali's *yajna*. But we can not call *yajna mandapa* a 'dancing hall' or 'theatre' in the strict sense of the term though we cannot deny its role in the evolution of the theatre.

Though it is difficult to state with precision when some kind of theatrical structure came into being as a separate entity, we find many references to *ranga*, *samajvata*, *sangeet shala*, *nritya shala* in pre-Bharata literature. *Sabha* was one of the places where theatrical performances were held. In the *Ayodhya kanda* of the *Ramayana* it is stated that friends tried to amuse Bharata by relating stories, organising dances and performing humorous plays in the

sabha. Sabha *parva* of the *Mahabharata* gives detailed information about various *sabhas*. In his learned article in 'Indian Antiquary', Dr. Bhandarkar has tried to prove that the word *samaj* means theatre. The term *ranga* was popularly used to denote some kind of theatrical structure. In *Guttil Jataka* we find an elaborate description of *ranga mandapa*. *Ayoghar Jataka* also mentions *ranga*. Buddhist works like *Chullavagga*, *Gamini Samyutta* have used the word *ranga* to denote theatre. In the first act of Bhasa's *Charudattam*, Vasantsena is said to have received education in theatrical arts—'*Ranga-praveshena Kalanam Chaiva Shikshaya*.' The stage property which is once used on the stage in a performance and after that which has become useless is called '*Nivruttaranga-prayojanam*' in *Pratima Nataka* of Bhasa. In the same play words like *nepathya* (denoting green room) and *sangeeta shala* are used. In many *Jataka* tales a temporary circular open-air auditorium raised by 'fixing the seats circle on circle, tier above tier' around the arena left for performers is mentioned (Sangeet-Natak, Vol. 38, pp. 29 to 34). In his '*Encyclopaedia of Hindu Architecture*', P.K. Acharya remarks: 'It would be a limit of prejudice to imagine that although the Hindus knew all about dramatic performance and although the art of building was understood and successfully practised between 3000 to 4000 B.C. when Mohenjodaro edifices might have been erected, yet they did not think of constructing a playhouse even after the model of then existing natural caves.'

The oldest rock-cut cave theatre *Sitabengara*, in the Ramgarh hills is dateble to 300 B.C. The *Natyasastra* of Bharat Muni, a treatise on dramaturgy written around 2nd Century B.C.-2nd A.D., gives us elaborate constructional details of various types of theatre halls. Though we can form the idea of kinds of theatre available before 2nd century B.C. from the literary evidence cited above, no contemporary example has survived the ravages of time except for two cave theatre. These cave theatres are of their own types and can not be taken as a general model in common use. They can not be called *ranga mandapa* as such. What kind of theatre structures were used for performing dramas or dances in a village or *grama*, *nagara* etc? What kind of theatre was in the mind of Kautilya when he stated in *Arthasastra* that no permanent theatre-hall should be constructed near the village? Were the elaborate theatre structures described by Bharata available to performing artists wherever they went? We are able to reply to questions like these by quoting from literary works, but we could have been more precise if there had been any surviving model of the time before us. That perishable material like wood might have been used for constructing *ranga mandapas* is the possible explanation for non-availability of ancient theatrical structures and this assumption is not altogether wrong. But fortunately there are two early sculptural representations of *ranga mandapa* which may give us a fairly good idea about the type of theatrical structures generally used by the performing artists to present their shows, *Preksha-s*, at about 2nd Century B.C. Not much attention so far has been paid to the archaeological evidence mentioned above. One such *ranga mandapa* is carved in relief in Rani Gumph

at Udaygiri and the other on a stone slab excavated from Kankali tila at Mathura.

Cave Theatres

The twin hills, Udaygiri and Khandagiri, near Bhuvaneshwar in Orissa contain a series of fascinating Jain caves of great antiquity. One of the caves executed in Udayagiri bears the famous inscription of Emperor Kharavela who claims to be '*Gandharva-Veda-Budha*', expert in theatrical arts. The inscription records that he had excavated one hundred and seventeen caves in the Kumari Parvata. However, evidence indicates that cave excavation activity started much earlier than his times in these hills. Dr. K.C. Panigrahi is of the opinion that the execution of important caves in the hills spreads over the period of about one thousand years—1000 B.C. to 75 B.C. The double-storied spacious Rani Gumpha cave in Udayagiri is one of the largest caves known for some of the best illustration of archaic Indian art. According to Dr. Charles Fabri 'the bottom story of Rani Gumpha contains works as old as almost any in historic India and some of the carvings must, on stylistic grounds, be firmly datable to the 2nd Century B.C. Among these carvings is an interesting relievo depicting a girl dancing under a pavilion accompanied by a four-piece musical orchestra. This is very important piece of evidence which points to early theatrical structure.

Carved in relief between the doors of the cells opening in the bottom storey carridor is an all female dramatic spectacle termed by Kautilya *stree preksha* in his *Arthasastra*. The orchestra is accommodated to the left of the dancing figure. *Natyasastra* places the orchestra behind the performers close to the *nepathya griha*. Two girls sitting close to the dancer are playing on drums while the next two are playing on a harp-like musical instrument and lute respectively. They are a crowded group huddled together. Compared to these figures, more space is allotted to the tall and graceful danseuse to clarify her posture in greater details and emphasise her prominent position in the group of performers. G.S. Ghurve in his book '*Bharat Natya and its Costume*' describes the scene as the 'earliest representation of human beings dancing in our country'. Though the copper figurine of a dancing girl from Mohenjodaro and the limestone *Nataraja* statuette from Harappa are the earliest extant examples, the Ranigumpha danseuse is certainly one of the earliest dancing figures carved on the stone surface in historic India. It may also be noted here that possibly Rani Gumpha was the venue of the *samaj* festival full of '*Nata-Gita-Vadita*. organised by the Emperor Kharavela around 2nd century B.C. The girl seems to have been displaying a beautiful pose in *Odramagadhi* style mentioned by Bharata in the 13th Chapter along with other classical dance styles—*Avanti*, *Dakshinatya* and *Panchali*.

In the context of our present study the pavilion under which she is dancing is significant. It is a rectangular structure with roof supported by

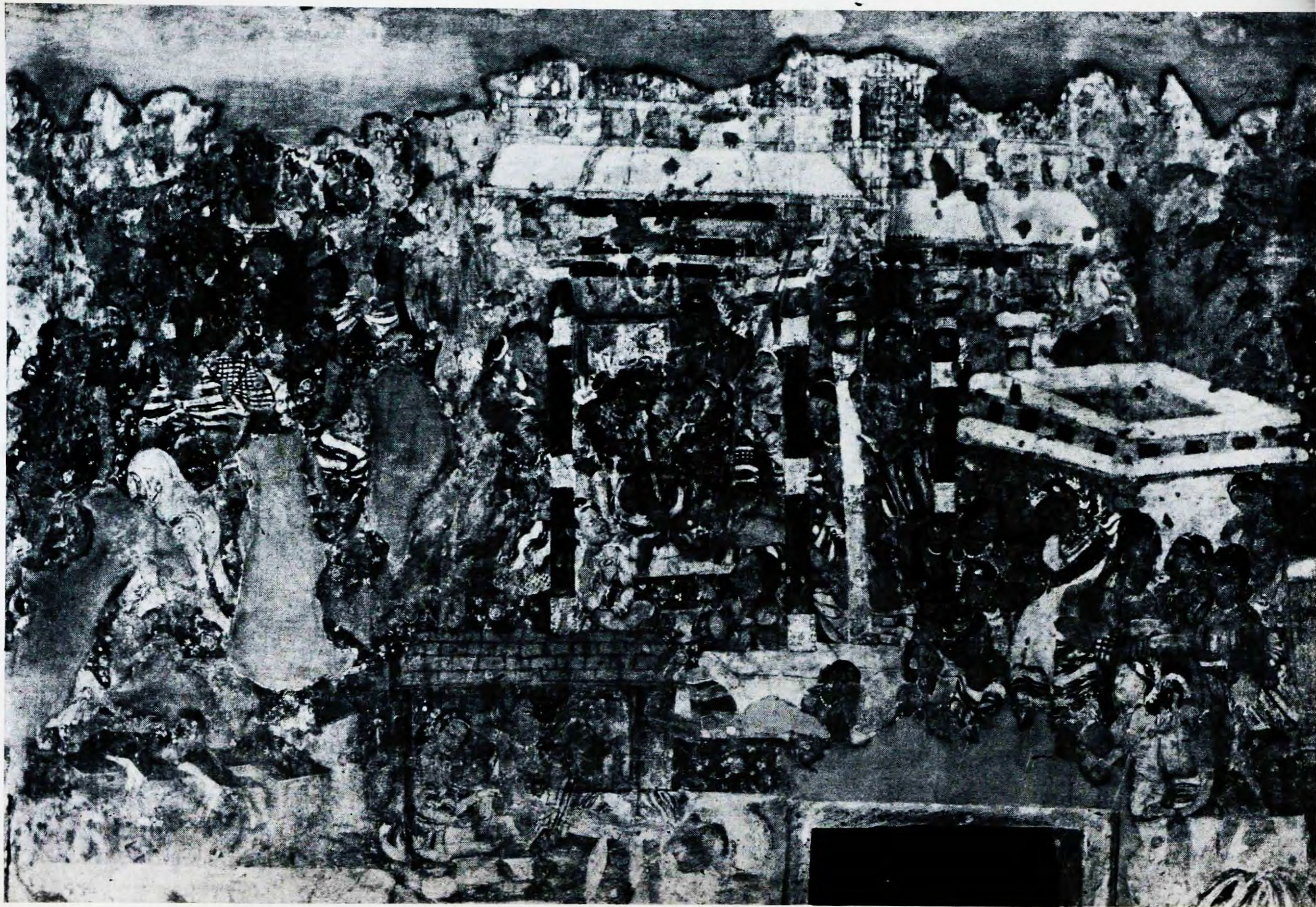
four pillars. Two front pillars are carved prominently. They have simple straight round shafts. A portion of the upper tip of the pillar, to the left of the dancing figures, resembles much the lotiform bell-capital of the Asokan pillar or inverted lotus without its downward flowing linear design. The motif might have been copied from the Asokan pillar at Bhuvanesvar which was later converted into a colossal lingum now seen in Bhaskaresvara temple. A cup-shaped plinth, growing wider at the top, is seen above it to support the roof. The design of another pillar is slightly different at the top. A square plinth is seen above two thick ring-like designs. The pillars are devoid of any other embellishments. Speaking about the superstructure that rests on the pillars, Dr. Fabri remarks that it looks like 'well known Ziggurat or stepped tower motif'. Ziggurat is a type of temple architecture found in ancient Chaldea, Babylonia and Assyria. The term is derived from the Babylonian verb *Zagaru* meaning 'to the tall, to be lofty'. The motif is cut into a stone slab above the pillars. The whole structure is very simple, without much ornamentation and archaic in execution. It is amply clear that this structure carved in stone is a prototype of a similar wooden pavilion used at the time to present dances, dramas or musical concerts. This is the most basic and primary structure any primitive theatre architect could conceive when he intended to raise a *nritya mandapa* or *ranga*—four pillars and a roof above. It may be noted here that traditional dance-dramas like *Kathakali* and *Yakshagana* are still performed under such simple pavilions. A near similar *ranga mandapa* is painted on the walls of Ajanta cave No. 1 while depicting a scene from *Mahajanaka Jataka*.

A fragment of a running frieze containing a dancing scene, recovered from the Kankali tila at Mathura and now housed in the Lucknow Museum, (No. J 354), gives us a clue to understand theatrical structure prevalent around 2nd century B.C. The scholars have interpreted the dancing scene differently. According to Dr. V.S. Agrawala it depicts the nativity scene of Lord Mahavira. However, Dr. J.P. Jain, Dr. U.P. Shah, V.N. Srivastava opine that Apsara Nilanjana is shown here dancing before the first Jaina Tirthankara, Rishabhadeva. The dwarfish nude male figure in the audience watching the performance is, according to them, that of Rishabhadeva. The story of Apsara Nilanjana is recorded in the Jaina *Adipurana*. The identification of the scene on the frieze with this or that Jaina myth is not important to us in the present context. This piece of sculpture belonging to the 2nd century B.C. interests us most not because of its mythical content but because its depiction of the *ranga mandapa*.

Here the dancing hall is an oblong hut open on all sides except probably at the back. Two front pillars and one at the back is clearly visible. They are all alike. The pillar shafts are slender, straight and generally round with inverted E shaped capitals purported to give wider support to the roof. The superstructure consists of a triangular frame fitted with joists and covered with tiles. The L shaped tiles are hooked comfortably in the frame. The female dancer and all the five members of the orchestra are accommodated on the



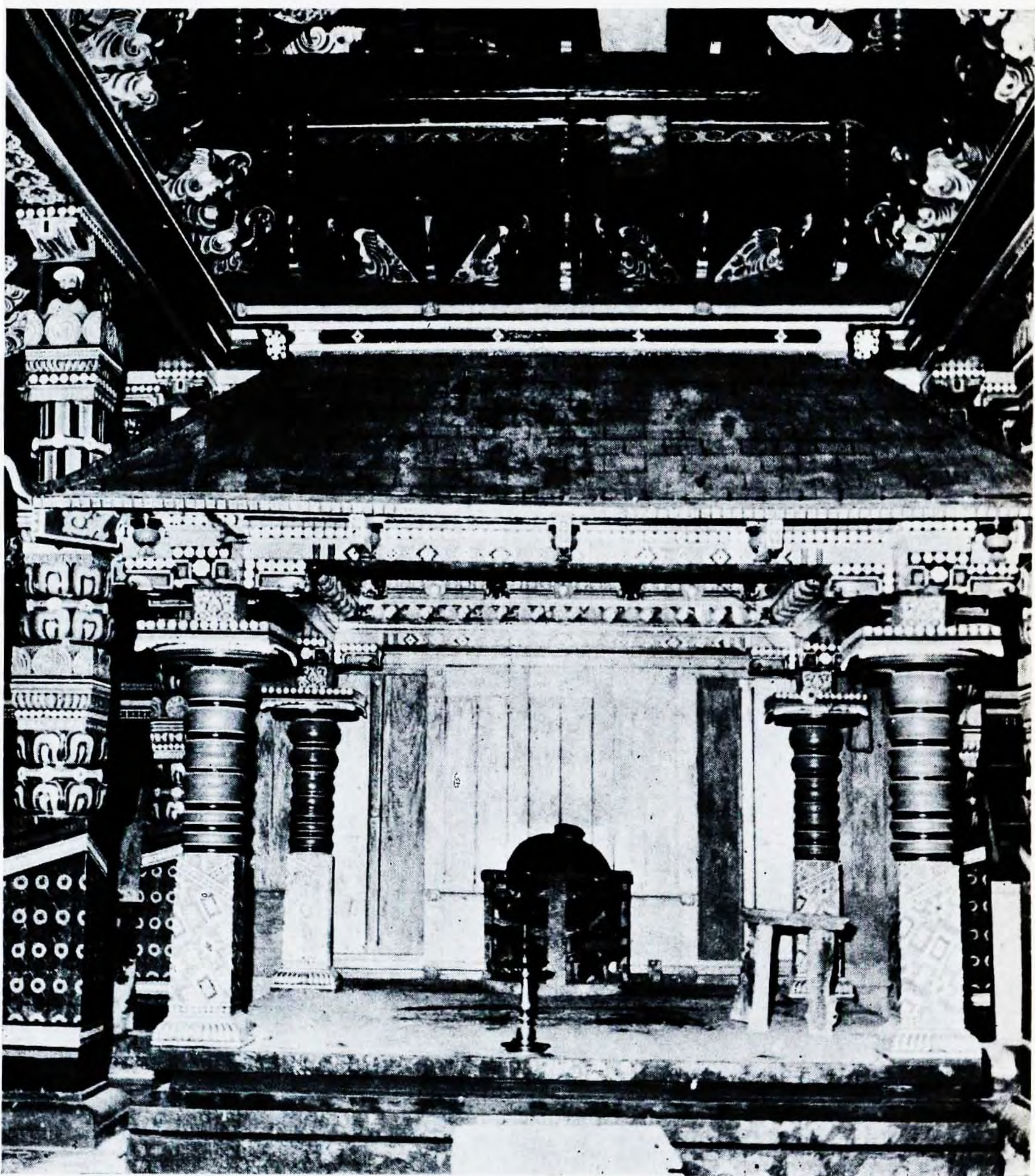
Ranga Mandap, 2nd Century B.C. (Courtesy Lucknow Museum)



Ranga Mandap, Ajanta, Cave No. 1 (Courtesy Archaeological Survey of India)



Ranga Mandap, Rani Gumpha 2nd C. B.C.



Koothambalam, Guruvayur Temple (Kerala),

stage with their musical instruments. A musician to the left of the dancer is sitting on the floor holding a round gong in his left hand and a small, thick striking rod in his right. Two musicians to the left of the dancing figures are playing on drums and two standing immediately behind them are probably singers of the party forming a chorus. The beautiful dancing pose of the girl is well caught by the sculpture. In this panel we see the audience also. The audience and the performers are on the same floor level. The people in the front row are sitting on the ground while the spectators in the back row are standing behind them. In the audience is a small nude figure 'carrying in the left hand a *mayura picchika*', a fan made of peacock feathers. The figure is identified as that of Rishabhadeva.

Basic Design

Though there are some differences in the design of the roof and the pillar capitals of these two dancing halls, there are many basic similarities also. In both cases the theatre is a four pillared structure with a roof above, designed only to accomodate performing artists and the accompanying musical orchestra. There is no raised dias as a stage. No front or side curtains are seen. Probably the back of the pavilion is closed by a curtain. The audience is sitting in the open. This means no auditorium is provided. The basic material used for the construction is wood. The use of flat tiles fitted in an A-shaped frame sloping on both sides is a special feature of the Mathura dancing hall. It seems that the roof of the Ranigumpha dancing hall is flat with some Ziggurat type decoration carved on it. Both the theatre halls are quite simple in their total design and easy to construct at any place with the help of easily available indigenous materials.

One need not at once jump to the conclusion that around the 2nd Century B.C. the Indian theatre was a four pillared structure with a roof, open on all sides except probably at the back and no other type near, identical, or totally different from the above mentioned model, existed at the time. There is ample literary evidence to prove otherwise. But the sculptural evidence of the same period coming from two places far away from each other may help us to state that for presenting dramatic spectacles or dance, music performances a simple four pillared wooden structure was also used. This is the earliest sculptural evidence explaining the structure of a dancing hall or *ranga*.

It seems that Bharata developed this basic unit (or idealised it) into a fullfledged theatre hall. He added two *mattavarinis* at both the sides, green-room, *nepathyagriha*, at the back and extended the roof above the heads of the audiences also. It is very clear from the *Natyasastra* that a closed theatre was proposed by Bharata because the near open one of the above description stands exposed to disturbances of different kinds which Bharata calls *vighanas*. However, the basic four-pillared structure remained in his theatre under the

name *rangapitha*. Bharata's theatre is not easy to construct hence this simple four pillared model remained in vogue. The dancing pavilion painted in the Ajanta cave No. 1 testifies to the fact. In the *nata mandirs* attached to Orissan temples, including Lingaraja at Bhuvaneshvar and Jagannatha at Puri, this basic unit is seen forming the core of the entire structure. In the *mahamandapas* of the Khajuraho group of temples, four pillared *rangapitha*, near square in size, is placed in the centre. The 17th century Kerala temple theatres, *Koothambalams*, which have adopted many features of Bharata's theatre design have also a four-pillared stage with roof, all made of wood. Despite variations in decorative patterns the basic stage structure conceived by the primitive theatre architect about the 2nd Century B.C. remained in vogue since its inception.

