

NĀTYAMAṆḌAPA*

A Real or a Fictional Performing Space of the Classical Indian Theatre

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Among many problematical questions concerning *nāṭya* one is whether *nāṭya* was performed in a theatre/theatres described in the second chapter of *Nāṭyaśāstra*.¹ Despite some opinions, based on the description of the *nāṭyamaṇḍapa* in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, arguing that theatre really existed as a separate edifice,² I am of a different view and I think that here we are dealing with the description of a hypothetical theatrical building.

If so, why are there so many names for the theatre if the theatre building never existed? Already in the Ch. 1 theatre is mentioned as *nāṭyaveśman*, *nāṭyagrha*, *nāṭyamaṇḍapa* (1,79-1,82) which Viśvakarman had to build because *vighnas* tried to destroy *nāṭya*. For the sake of protection (*rakṣaṇa*) from the malevolent spirits *vighnas*,³ *maṇḍapa* had to be protected by a host of gods: Candra, *lokapālas*, Maruts, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni, clouds, deities of four colour-groups, Ādityas, Rudras, Bhūtas, *apsarasas*, *yakṣinīs*, the ocean-god, the rod of Yama, (Śiva's) pike, Niyati and Yama (1,82-88). Indra himself stayed by the side of the stage (*pārśve raṅgapīṭhasya* 1,89) and in the part called *mattavāraṇī* was placed lightning (*sthāpitā mattavāraṇyām*

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1 All references concerning the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are to Ghosh's edition and translation.

2 About the theatre architecture in ancient India, cf. Bansat-Boudon [1992: 216-233]; Bhat [1975: XXXVI-LIV]; Gitomer [1984: 63-65]; Keith [1970: 358-360]; Konow [1920: 3-5]; Mankad [1950: 1-45]; Marasinghe [1989: 56-120]; Mehta [1995: 37-70]; Panchal [1996: 1-86]; Raghavan [no year mentioned: 156-161]; Rao [1956: 423-454]; Richmond [1981: 74-90]; Tarlekar [1975: 185-208].

3 *Vighnas* are mysterious beings; according to Ghosh's translation they are malevolent or evil spirits; they are mentioned together with *asuras* in *Nāṭyaśāstra*; but whom do they really represent is unclear to me. According to Monier-Williams [1970: 957], the word has following meanings: a breaker, destroyer, an obstacle, impediment, hindrance, opposition, prevention, interruption, any difficulty or trouble. Do they represent the profane versus sacred?

vidyut) for killing the *daityas*. In the pillars of *mattavāraṇī* (*stambheṣu mattavāraṇyāḥ* 1,90) *bhūtas*, *yakṣas*, *piśācas* and *guhyakas* were put. Anticipating the later mention of *mattavāraṇī*, it is very important to keep in mind that *mattavāraṇī* is always in singular what indicates that there is only one *mattavāraṇī* with four *stambhas*.

In the *jarjara*⁴ was posted *vajra* (1,91) and in its sections were stationed Brahmā, Śiva, Viṣṇu and Nāgas-Śeṣa, Vāsuki and Takṣaka. Brahmā occupied the middle of the stage (*raṅgapīṭhasya madhye* 1,94). Yakṣas, Guhyakas and Pannagas protected the bottom of the stage (1,95). Already at the beginning we meet sacred geography. At the end of the first chapter *Nāṭyaśāstra* states that worship (*yajana*) is needed in the *nāṭyamaṇḍapa* (1,123), that without offering (*pūjā*) to the *raṅga* there can be no observing of the performance (*prekṣā* 1,125) and that worshipping the deities of the stage (*raṅgadaivata-pūjana*) is to be performed (1,126).

Chapter 2 starts with mentioning the *yajana* connected with *raṅga* and *pūjana* in the *nāṭyaveśman* — it should be notified that terms *yajana* and *pūjana*, on the one hand, and *raṅga* and theatre, on the other, often alternate, interchange one with another and it is sometimes difficult to discern whether we have to do with a stage or with a theatre. In the context of building a *nāṭyamaṇḍapa* a *vāstu* and *pūja*, both connected with it, are mentioned (2,6) as well as the cleaning of the soil, and measurement of *vāstu* or the site (2,24); every act connected with the building is done under a relevant asterism. The ideal measurement of the *madhyama vikṛṣṭa nāṭyamaṇḍapa* is 64 cubits in length and the breadth is 32 (2,17). After the division of the plot of land, the foundation is done during auspicious asterism accompanied with different ceremonies. Then follows the building of walls, of pillars (*stambha*), doors etc. and then comes the mysterious *mattavāraṇī*:

raṅgapīṭhasya pārśve tu kartavyā mattavāraṇī || 63 ||
catuḥstambhasamāyuktā raṅgapīṭhapramānataḥ |
adhyardhahastotsedhena kartavyā mattavāraṇī || 64 ||
utsedhena tayostulyam kartavyam raṅgamaṇḍapam ... |65||

I translate it like this: *Mattavāraṇī* should be made on the side of

⁴ Cf. Kuiper [1983: 230-257].

raṅgapīṭha, furnished with 4 pillars, in the measure of *raṅgapīṭha*, *mattavāraṇī* should be made 1 1/2 *hastas* in height, *raṅgamaṇḍapa* should be made equal in height to those two.

I think that the dual *tayos* refers to *raṅgapīṭha* and *mattavāraṇī*. But how can *raṅgamaṇḍapa* be only 1 1/2 *hastas* or 67,5 cm high? The problem is solved if under *raṅgamaṇḍapa* the stage or *raṅga* was meant and not a theatre.

Mattavāraṇī is always mentioned in singular and it is difficult to understand why there were so many theories about two *mattavāraṇīs*.⁵ I think that we are here not dealing with some kind of pavilion, turret and the like simply because the measure of 1 1/2 *hastas* shows that *mattavāraṇī* is only about 67,5 cm high, it is *pārśve*, on the side, what shows that it could not be an acting area. Logically speaking, two constructions on the front stage would significantly lessen the performing area and would largely obstruct the view of the whole stage for the spectators. And as *mattavāraṇī* had to be built before *raṅgapīṭha* and *raṅgaśīrṣa*, that means that *mattavāraṇī* could not have been a pavilion posted on the stage, because stage was not yet built (2,67-68). So what could that *mattavāraṇī* be? In my opinion, *mattavāraṇī* is the front panel of *raṅgapīṭha* in which I see a plinth of the stage looking to the east, 1 1/2 *hastas* high; *raṅgaśīrṣa* is the upper surface of *raṅgapīṭha*. The problem of the meaning of the word and of the function of the *mattavāraṇī* is yet to be solved. Maybe the term can be translated as female elephant in rut? But why *matta*, in rut? We have already heard that Indra put *vidyut* in *mattavāraṇī* for its protection and that it was oriented towards east. Indra's elephant is regent of the east, one of the *diggajas*, *diśāgajas*, *dinnāgas*, *digvāraṇas*, one of divine elephants, mythical guardians of the quarters.⁶ Is it possible that Indra's elephant Airāvata is here meant, symbol of Mahendra who is embodied in him? But as the noun is feminine, it would be more correct to say that *mattavāraṇī* could maybe represent the female of Indra's elephant Airāvati. Airāvati signifies lightning,⁷ and we know that there is *vidyut* in the *mattavāraṇī*. And Airāvati also denotes a particular portion of a moon's path including the lunar mansions *punarvasu*, *puṣya* and

⁵ Cf. Bhat [1975: XLII-XLIV]; Diwekar [1961: 431-437]; Rao [1956: 423-454]; Sandesara-Shah [1961: 438-441]; see also authors mentioned under footnote 2 of this paper.

⁶ Cf. Hopkins [1974: 17].

⁷ Monier-Williams [1970: 234].

āśleṣa. Besides, a *piṇḍi* or certain gesticulation/dance form attached to Śakra or Indra is called *Airāvati* (4,259). It is also worth noting that *Airāvati* appeared during *Amṛtamanthana* which is the name of the *samavakāra* mentioned in Ch. 4. Unfortunately, it is not easy to understand the connection between these meanings, but there must be some meaningful connection between them. So the mysterious *mattavāraṇi* is still waiting to be finally decoded. That Indra was compared to *vidyut* can be seen in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* (1,36) where he uses the word *vidyutairāvata*; Nandargikar's translation is "like Lightning and Airāvata riding on an autumnal cloud"⁸ Is *mattavāraṇi* mentioned anywhere else in the literature?

The description of the theatre-house goes on by enumerating the *raṅgapīṭha*, *raṅgaśirṣa*, *ṣaṭdārūka*, *dvāras*, *nepathya*, *dhāraṇi*, *dvibhūmi*, *vedikā*, etc. It seems important that the *nātyamaṇḍapa* should be *śailaguhākāra*, in other words that the playhouse should be made like a mountain cavern and that it should have two floors.

After the description of the procedure of building a *nātyamaṇḍapa*, Ch. 3 brings the description of the consecration of the playhouse which is, as mentioned before, connected with the religious function of the *nātyamaṇḍapa*. After the *nātyācārya* has made obeisance to the Śiva, Brahmā, Bṛhaspati, Viṣṇu, Indra, Guha, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Medhā, Smṛti, Mati, Soma, Sūrya, Maruts, *lokapālas* and many other gods, there follows a *pūjā* to *jarjara* and a *pūjā* of the stage where a *maṇḍala* for the instalation of the gods should be drawn (3,20), with doors on 4 sides and in the apartments (*kakṣyāvibhāge* - 3,22): in the middle should be put Brahmā, in the East Śiva with his host of Bhūtas, Nārāyaṇa, Indra, Skanda, Sūrya, Aśvins, Candra, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Śraddhā, Medhā; in the SE Agni, Svāha, Viśvadevas, Gandharvas, Rudras and Ṛṣis, in the S Yama, Mitra with his followers, Pitṛs, Piśācas, Urāgas and Guhyakas; in SW the Rākṣasas and all the Bhūtas; in the W the seas and Varuṇa, in the NW the Seven Winds and Garuḍa with other birds; in the N Kuvera, Mothers of the *nātya*, *yakṣas* with their followers, in the NE leaders of Gaṇas such as Nandi, Brahmaṛṣis and the host of *bhūtas* (3,23-31). All these *pūjās* are followed by a special one for *mattavāraṇi* (3,40-44), accompanied by *mantras* for different gods in the *mattavāraṇi* (3,45-3,71). Does it mean that the deities from the *maṇḍala* are present in

⁸ *Raghuvamśa*, p. 15.

the *mattavāraṇī* (*yāścāsyāṃ mattavāraṇyāṃ saṃśritā vāstudevatāḥ* 3,69)? And why are so many gods occupying *mattavāraṇī* when it is directly connected with Indra?

The motive of *jarjara*, which seems almost like a *Leitmotiv*, comes again but as it is presently not in the focus of our attention we can not dwell on that complicated subject as well as on different following parts of the *pūjā*.

It is interesting to note that in Ch. 5 *ṛṣis* say that they have heard about the birth of the *nāṭya*, about the *jarjara* and *pūjā*, but interestingly, there is no mention of the *mandapa* (5,2)! The *pūrvaraṅga* chapter is too complicated for a short description, basically it is a ceremony of adoration of deities (cf. 36,29) what means that *pūrvaraṅga* is not *nāṭya*.⁹

After the first five chapters which in my opinion can be labelled as mytho-historical prolegomena to the art of *nāṭya*, the description of the *nāṭya* starts in Ch.6 and it must be kept in mind that the *raṅga* is the last on the list in the *nāṭyasamgraha* (6,10); it is quite interesting that only *raṅga* or stage is mentioned, not a *mandapa* — as if *raṅga* could have been enough for the *prayoga* of *nāṭya*!

As we have seen, the *mandapa* had to be built by the divine architect Viśvakarman as a means of protection against *vighnas*. The process of building started with elaborate rituals and different kinds of worship of gods who have their specific places in the theatre-house. All this seems to have nothing in common with the secular art of *nāṭya* and looks like the prescription for building a temple as seen in the *śilpāsāstras*.

We can see analogies in the process of building, in the description of the site, its purification, insemination, levelling, drawing the plan;¹⁰ we see that *mandapa* is like a temple built on the principle of *vāstupuruṣamaṇḍala*, that it is square and is divided into compartments.¹¹ Varāhamihira in his *Bṛhatsamhitā* (Ch. LVI,10) prescribes the *vāstumandala*, that is a geometric diagram symbolizing the structure of the cosmos, of 64 squares for temples as the most sacred;¹² four cardinal points are represented by the *lokapālas*,

⁹ I think that in the historical evolution of *nāṭya*, when *nāṭya* became a classical theatre, *pūrvaraṅga* was replaced by *nāṇḍī* (cf. 36,22).

¹⁰ Cf. Kramrisch [1986: 3-17].

¹¹ Cf. Kramrisch [1986: 19-63].

¹² *Bṛhatsamhitā*, p. 538.

divinities are assigned into the squares. I think that all the lists of gods in all the *pūjās* mentioned in the first five chapters of *Nāṭyaśāstra* should be compared with each other and with the various lists of *parivāradevatās* in *śilpaśāstras*; the *vāstudevatās* mentioned in *Nāṭyaśāstra* remind me of *padadevatās*, *parivāradevatās*, *pārśvadevatās* found in *śilpaśāstras*¹³ — they are similar, although not the same. *Śilpins sthāpaka* and *sūtradhāra* are mentioned; elements important for the building of a *maṇḍapa* as measurements, *pīṭha*, *bhūmi*, pillars, *vedikā*, *gavākṣa* etc. and the substances of which the temple is built are described. Entrance is facing east. *Brāhmamaṇḍala*, described in the *pūrvaraṅga* chapter, may be seen as the central *Brāhmasthāna* of temple with the vertical axis in the form of *jarjara*.

Everything points to the sacred architecture with its sacred geography defined with the help of geomancy, built in sacred time, in auspicious moments of the different *nakṣatras*, what points to the importance of astrology. *Nāṭyamaṇḍapa* is a sacred space defined by sacred ritual; it represents a temple (Lat. *templum* from Greek *temenos*) which means a cut off space, referring to an enclosed area for a particular purpose such as the service of a god. The sacred space, marked by a religious building, ensures the isolation and thus the preservation both of the sacred inside and the profane outside it. I think that the wall that can be seen as the demarcation line between the sacred and the profane inside the hypothetic theatre could be *mattavāraṇī*. In *mattavāraṇī* I see a sort of fence in the meaning of *temenos* — the sacred space of *raṅga* is warded off from the profane public. Does it mean that *raṅga* or a stage is sacred and auditorium profane? And why should *raṅga* needed for profane art be a sacred space? Does it all have a deeper symbolical meaning and has nothing to do with reality of performing space?

As far as I know, there is not a single material evidence about the existence of a theatre-building, no sketches remained, no drawings, paintings or models, and there are no ruins, not a slightest bit of material evidence that could point to some kind of theatre. We have only the description in *Nāṭyaśāstra* which gives us ideal models rather than actual edifices. The literary evidence is not conclusive either and

13 Cf. Kramrisch [1986: 85-97].

what we find in the *nāṭya*-literature does not help us because we only hear of some kind of “*salle de spectacle*”.¹⁴

I think that S.Lévi was right when he said: “*Le théâtre est toujours resté dans l’Inde un plaisir de circonstance et n’a jamais eu d’édifices spéciaux. Les ouvrages littéraires se jouaient au palais des rois; les spectacles populaires se donnaient en plein air.*”¹⁵ Although Lévi wrote this more than hundred years ago, when very little has been known about *nāṭya*, his opinion is closer to the truth than the opinion of those who saw the existence of complex theatre-houses in classical India. Was there any need for permanent building when, as we can see from the texts of *nāṭya*, that performances were connected with *utsavas*, what means that *nāṭya* was performed periodically during important festivals.¹⁶ The texts of dramas mention temples and halls in the palaces and it seems that *nāṭya* was performed in special pavilions attached to the courts or sometimes maybe in temple-halls. An important evidence comes from *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself which says that “in temples, palaces and houses of army-leaders and other prominent persons, dramatic performances (*prayoga*) are mostly held by women in men’s role” (35,37). There is no mention of special theatres.

The question of the existence of permanent theatre-houses in classical India remains open and every source should be very carefully investigated. I am aware that evidences are missing for any definite conclusion. I agree with F. Richmond when he says, “Thus we are forced to rely almost entirely on the body of garbled evidence concerning buildings which may never have been constructed!”¹⁷ and “it seems unwise to construct a conjectural model of ancient Indian playhouse. Such an attempt, however fascinating, may serve only to mislead the unsuspecting layman into believing that we are certain of the appearance of the Sanskrit theater, when in fact we are far from it.”¹⁸

There is only an ideal model from *Nāṭyaśāstra* which, in my opinion, represents sacred space which conforms to the rules for building a temple as found in *śilpaśāstras*. I don’t have any

14 Lévi [1890: 371].

15 Lévi [1890: 8].

16 E.g.: *vasantotsava* in Kālidāsa’s *Mālavikāgnimitra* and in Harṣa’s *Ratnāvalī*, Kālapriya-nātha dedicated to Śiva in Bhavabhūti’s *Uttararāmacarita*, etc.

17 Richmond [1981: 76].

18 Richmond [1981: 79-80].

information whether any of the extant *śilpaśāstras* mentions a theatre as a separate edifice. My understanding is based on open questions. We have to ask ourselves whether the *nātyamaṇḍapa* symbolically represents the temple and the *raṅga*, with its *brāhmamaṇḍala*, is a kind of *pratibimba* of *garbhagrha*. It is difficult to decide what is architecturally real, what is symbolical representation, and what is ideal construction made to conform the rules of the *śāstra* literature?¹⁹ At the present level of my understanding, *Nātyaśāstra* describes first the sacred space of the building, then the sacred space of the *raṅga* or stage, after that the sacred space of the *mattavāraṇī* as a sacred fence of the most sacred part that is *brāhmamaṇḍala*. The conclusion might be that we find ourselves in a sacred space of a temple, not in a profane space of a classical theatre!

At the end, the question remains whether a permanent theatre building used for the *prayoga* of *nātya* in classical India ever existed!

For answering this question, I think that an interdisciplinary research could put more light on this unsolved problem. In trying to understand such a difficult text with so many different levels of signifi- cance (mythic, *śāstric*, artistic, etc.), which are inextricably bound together and therefore hardly understandable, a whole team of specialists is needed for a more fruitful research — as, for example, experts in *Nātyaśāstra*, in *śilpaśāstras*, in the *pūjā*-ritual, in mythology, architects, archeologists and others. Maybe this kind of cooperation, a *samavakāra* let me use this *Nātyaśāstra*-word, could bring better results.

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¹⁹ Cf. Pollock [1989: 17-26, 301-312].

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