

Stage Lighting: A Cultural Perspective

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All components of theatre become more than constituents in a cultural examination. Stage lighting is no exception. In a cultural perspective stage lighting ceases to be a manifestation of merely physical forces conditioned by available sources, mechanisms or material of lighting. Stage lighting emerges as a product of a larger entity, namely the theatre consciousness of a people. In its turn theatre consciousness is realised as a summation of cultural decisions taken by different people speaking different languages over a period of time. Consequently, stage lighting is influenced by a number of considerations even though participating in a performance shines through as one common aim. It is on this background that lighting in theatre needs to be studied and evaluated.

According to the Indian tradition light (predictably) owed its existence to the Sun-god, one of the universal and principle deities. The Sun-god had multiple aspects and he was therefore represented by various solar deities, namely Surya, Savitri, Vishnu, Pusan, Mitra and Ushas. In the present context it is important to note that Agni, the Fire-god, came to be worshipped for his solar qualities as well as his special capacity to mediate between human beings and Gods. For the latter reason agni is defined as one who goes upwards.

Associated with water, sun and gold, agni was divided into three parts in order to create light. However, it is worth noting that while the lustre of the sun is said to be the faculty of light, the one attributed to fire is described as the faculty of heat. Obviously fire by itself is not treated as a source/agency of light. This is the reason why it is added that the sun's lustre enters the fire after sunset and makes the fire shine from afar.

One may conclude that Indian culture held light to be a humanisation of fire. It is symptomatic that the birth of fire enjoys anthropomorphic accounts. For example, an altar was considered to be a woman giving birth to the fire-child. (*Puranic Beliefs*, vol. 2, p. 523). The act of kindling fire or the shapes of the fire-seats, therefore, became symbolic and stood for relevant human actions.

Even after humanising fire into light, the former continued to have links with the divine. Hence equations were struck between light sources and members of the pantheon. For example, sun, Krishna, Gauri, Durga and Kama were respectively associated with lamp wicks made of red, yellow, tawny, lac-dyed and black/blue cloth. In other words, lighting sources were considered to be important not only because they throw light on other external objects but because the sources by themselves acted as cultural communicators. Indian theatre (and not theatre in India!) invites examination in this perspective.

The first step in this direction would be to identify the lighting sources employed in Indian theatric manifestations during the pre-electricity era. The following list would prove useful in this connection. In it appear those lighting sources which were used in Maharashtra and areas adjacent to it.

1. Hilal
2. Palita
3. Mashal
4. Divti
5. Kandil
6. Panti
7. Chimni
8. Kakda
9. Samai
10. Handi-jhumbar
11. Tembha
12. Gas batti

The tabulated information given elsewhere in this issue covers a wider area. It would give an idea of the type of questions it is necessary to ask to determine the cultural role of different light sources.

From the multi-aspected data it is possible to draw a few interesting conclusions.

1. It seems that the lighting provided was not uniform and stable. Various spaces in the performing area were lit in different proportions and the lighting sources supplied a 'flickering' illumination.
2. The lighting sources produced 'pools of light' instead of spots, beams or streams. Obviously, objects or individuals were illuminated more or less according to their distance from the lighting sources. In other words,

illumination could not be automatically assumed. Locations of sources and the lit objects necessitated a purposeful manipulation depending on the requirement.

3. Very often, the lighting sources included both static as well as dynamic varieties. There are cases when performers themselves carried the lighting sources on them. On other occasions performers moved towards the sources at certain points to ensure theatric emphasis.

4. The sources generally operated from the front or from the sides. Top lighting was almost unknown. However, placement of the lighting sources at the foot level was not unknown. It is significant that on a majority of occasions the traditional lighting sources were themselves in view of the audience. The obvious effect is of a subtle registration of the illusive quality of theatric experiences.

5. There is no substantial evidence to suggest the use of coloured light. Yet the objects adjacent to the sources were often coloured, perforated or had a capacity to reflect.

6. The fuel used for lighting was oil, wood, cloth and (very lately in the pre-electricity era) gas. It is difficult to be categorical about the quality of light created through these sources. A detailed examination reveals that coconut oil, groundnut oil, wax and kerosene were the varieties used to soak in the wicks etc. It is possible to speculate that the light intensities thus created were varied.

7. The performers and the audience were not completely segregated 'lighting-wise'. No cut-off line operated to demarcate the performing and the viewing areas.

8. One may say that visibility as understood today was not the main criterion. The lighting obtained was low in intensity, intermittent and changeable in visibility. Nor was the visibility confined to the performers.

Any examination of the lighting sources would remain incomplete if no reference is made to their effects on acting and the reception of the latter by audiences. Following statements are to be viewed in this context.

Firstly, actors did not become cynosure of all eyes. Lines of visual communication existing and operating between performers and receivers did not pale into insignificance. To that extent the audience was induced to participate more and more directly.

Secondly, visibility was effective for broader rather than detailed acting. Nuances in the content therefore relied more on the language and speech resources than on gestures or facial expressions. Audiences were also responsive to the aural stimuli in general.

Thirdly, one cannot say that the lighting so obtained was suggestive, and yet it compelled imaginative responses from the audience.

The audience drew on its own intellectual and emotional hinterland to complete, or if necessary, reconstruct the picture. It is possible to maintain that, thus engrossed, the audience reached deeper in its total experience.

The nineteenth century dramatic tradition, with its heavy reliance on the proscenium stage, wings, scenery, makeup and lighting, brought about a near-complete change in the dramatic values. Playwrights, actors and audiences consequently entered into a very different kind of relationship. More technique, more art and more distance assumed importance.
