

A Scenographic study in *Draupadi's* festival

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Abstract:

The widespread presence of scenography is showing various changes in modern Western theatre societies. Like other Indian ritual theatres, *Draupadi's* ritual theatre has indigenous visual elements. This paper examines the scope of scenography analysis in open area theatrical performances in *Draupadi's* festival of Chittore District in *Andhra Pradesh*. In the cross-disciplinary performance review, I present hidden elements of scenography in ritual performance of *Draupadi's* festival. This paper also shows the examination of space, text, color and composition, performers and spectators in *Draupadi* festival with in the context of scenography.

Key words: Scenography; Space; and ritual theatre

1. Introduction to Scenography

Scenography derives from the Greek *sceno-grafika*, translated in common understanding as 'the writing of the stage space' (Howard, 2009, p.125). Scenography has served to effect a reappraisal of the role of design in relation to the expressive and communicative possibilities of the material stage, its interaction with the text and the performers, and audience engagement. (Nicholson, 2011, p. 111).

The word scenography was unfamiliar to ancient Indian theatre, but the idea did exist. According to Bharata's *Natyasastra* "There is no knowledge, no fine art, no learning, no skill, no yoga and no activity that is not represented in Drama (Jagirdar, 1946, p.16). It is clear that Indian Sanskrit theatre noticed the significance of fine arts in drama. Dhananjaya suggested that in all the production, dress, action and speech should be taken directly from the society and should be properly observed (Chaudhary, 2010, p.132). In his book *Sahityadarpana*, Vishva Nath Kaviraj claim that drama is nothing but visual poetry (*drishya kavya*). The terms '*Preksha*' and '*Rupaka*' clearly point at the visual aspect of drama (Pande, 1987, p. 277).

According to Pamela Howard, to be called scenographer means more than decorating a background for actors to perform in front of it; The scenographer also has to work harder to understand the needs of the performers, who are, in the end, the primary visual element one has to work with (126). The unseen job of scenographer in *Draupadi's* festival, is done by devotees. They design the space with locally available materials.

2. Introduction to Draupadi's festival

In districts of southern Andhra Pradesh, Community of *Agnikula Kshytriyas* celebrates *Draupdi's* festival in honor of the Goddess *Drauapdi*. This festival is not only celebrated in *Andhra Pradesh* but also in *Tamil Nadu* and *Karnataka*. This festival is celebrated in southern *Andhra Pradesh* for 18 days with daily *Draupadi's* temple ritual. In the part of the ritual, *Mahabharata* story narration is organized in *Harikatha*¹ form during the day, and *Veedhi-natakamu* performance is organized during the night.

Veedhi-natakamu is the one of the most important religious theatre form of south India. *Veedhi-natakamu* is mixed of two words *veedhi* and *natakamu*. *Veedhi* means street, *natakamu* means play. Usually, in *Draupadi's* festival, *Veedhi-natakamu* performances extend throughout the night. The performers of *Veedhi-natakmu*, are very talented to extend or shorten the performance duration. The length of the performance depends on the time a temple committee decides to begin. Both *Veedhi-natakamu* and *Harikatha* performances are presented in the premises of the temple. Few open air theatre performances are performed with the combination of *Veedhi natakamu* and *Draupadi* ritual. Example for this kind of open air theatre performances at *Draupadi's* festival are Killing of *Bakasura*, *Arjuna's* Penance, *Uttara-Gograhana* (seizure of the cattle in the north), Sacrifice of *Ilavantha*, and *Dhuryodhan Vadha*.

Veedhi-natakamu has been changing according to the change in new technology like adoption of flood lights and audio systems. This ritual theatre form is surviving because of village people who are patronages of the art. Like many other folk forms, *Veedhi-natakamu* performers do not have any manuscripts but the dialogues and scenes are being transmitted on from one generation to next generation through tradition and convention. Poetry of this manuscript has been admired by the villagers. Even today, they rewrite the script for any changes in the performance. Most of the actors improvise many scenes. Sometimes they depend on ad-lib for dialogues and verse.

In terms of performance and audience engagement in *Draupadi's* festival, audience who are devotees, performance lovers, children and vendors are not constantly engaged with the performance. Because of the length of the performance, audience sometimes go to have tea or take a nap. Because of this breaking connection between the audience and performance relation, scenography may not exist such as we observe in modern theatre. But, in small ritual performances like *Arjuna's* Penance, Killing of *Bakasura*, *Uttara-Gograhana* (seizure of the cattle in the north), Sacrifice of *Ilavantha* and *Dhuryodhana Vadha* where audience have constant engagement with the performance and one can observe the existence of the scenography.

3. Killing of Bakasura

Enactment of Killing of *Bakasura* is the first out door theatrical performance of *Draupadi's* festival. Whole villagers indirectly portray characters (of *Mahabharatha*) in this event. In this event, all the villagers represent that they live in *Ekachakra*² and send large amount of food to *Baksura*. On this day there will be a procession along with characters *Bhima* and *Bkasura*, a decorated bullock cart, and a music band. The villagers decorate in front of their house with *rangoli*. By the evening of the day, with cooked sweets and delicious vegetarian food, all the villagers eagerly wait for the arrival of character *Bhima* with his bullock cart. Once the bullock cart comes, villagers place the food in it and they follow the bullock cart. After collecting food from each house, with the bullock cart, the character *Bhima* comes to the *Draupid's* temple premise. Here, the two hired actors, enact the scene of 'killing of *Bakasura*'. In rejoicing the demise of *Bakasura*, the villagers distribute the food to everyone in the village.



Image-1: Temple committee members are distributing the collected food to other villagers

My primary observation here is that the whole village transforms into another space which shows the *Ekachakra*. The huge space is minimized with decorated bullock cart, two actors who portrayed *Bhima* and *Bakasura*, costumes and make-up of these two characters, music band and *rangoli*.

3.1. Uttara Gograhanam (seizure of the cattle in the north)

To enact this scene, the villagers choose a paddy field as performance space. On this day, they erect a *Jammi*³ tree in the paddy field and bring their decorated cattle to the performance space. The performance of 'Arjuna saving the cattle of *Virata* from the *Kauravas*' is enacted here. The entire dry paddy field is visually enhanced with the villagers, devotees, *Veedhi natakamu* performers, and decorated cattle.



Image 2: Decorated cattle in the performance space of Uttara Gograhanam



Image 3: Symbolic representation of *Jammi* tree where *Pandava*'s kept their weapons.

The *Jammi* tree which they erect, acts as symbolic representation of a *Jammi* tree in Mahabharatha where Pandava's keep their weapons. In this event, the *Jammi* tree is not big for one to climb, but the actor enacts as he climbs it.

3.2. *Arjuna*'s penance

In *Mahabharatha*, *Arjuna* performs penance in order to achieve *Pashupatastra*⁴. To represent the scene of "Arjuna's penance on *Indra Keeladri*⁵", performers use tall pole which is decorated with flowers leaves red, white and yellow colors.



Image 4: Actor (who is portraying *Arjuna*) is climbing wooden pole which represents the hill, *Indra Keeladri* in Mahabharatha.



Image 5: Devotees are taking *prasadam*⁶ from *Arjuana*.

This pole is made with a log of Palmyra palm or *Saraca asoca*. They fix minimum twenty small wooden pieces perpendicularly to the pole to climb it. They prepare small seating arrangement on the top of the pole. This seating arrangement is made with the shape of arc. The actor, who portrays the character of *Arjuna*, climbs the pole using wooden pieces. For each step, he recites *Slokas* in praise of Shiva. He is followed by other actor carrying fruits and flowers. After the actor climbs to the top of the pole, he throws flowers and fruits for devotees who are standing around the pole. Here the role of the pole is to represent the hill *Indra keeladri*. The arc on the top of the pole represent the place where Arjuna does penance.

In most of the proscenium theatre productions, audience does not experience sense of touch through the performance. But in ritual theatre performances, audience also experience sense of touch through the performance. For example in *Arjuna's* penance, *Arjuna* throws flowers and fruits on the devotees. Audience directly touch it and feel it.

3.3. Sacrifice of Ilavantha

The son of *Arjuna* and *Uloopi*, *Ilavantha* is the central character in the event of 'Sacrifice of *Ilavantha*'. *Ilavantha* has other names too, such as *Ilavanthudu* and *Aravan*. *Ilavantha* comes forward to sacrifice himself in place of *Krishna*. *Krishna* grants *Ilavanth's* wish to live on after the sacrifice to see the loss of his enemies. Consequently that night *Ilavantha* cuts off all the limbs of his body and offers them to *Kaali*. In Mahabharatha, *Ilavath's* head was kept on a top of hill to watch the *Mahabharath* battle.

To perform this event villagers make *Ilavantha's* sculpture. To make this sculpture, villagers prepare headless clay sculpture. Later they add to this with a carved wooden head of *Ilavantha*. They keep this sculpture in the premises of *Draupadi's* temple and perform the event with the help of professional actors of *Veedhi natakamu*. Villagers keep the head of the *Ilavantha* in the temple premises until *Draupadi's* festival is finished.

It is observed that the villagers don't use any actor to perform Sacrifice of Ilavanta. They know that it would not be effective and appropriate to execute the scene of sacrifice with an actor.



Image 6: *Ilavantha's* sculpture at the *Draupadi* temple premises.



Image 6: Two actors who are portraying Bheema and Dhuryodana characters, are performing the scene assassination of Duryodhana on the reclining statue of *Dhuryadaa*.

3.4. Dhuryodhana Vadha (assassination of Duryodhana)

To illustrate the scene of '*Dhuryodhana Vadha*' villagers make huge *Dhuryodhana's* reclining statue with soil. This three dimensional reclining statue is made approximately with a width of 10m, height of 2.5m and a length of 30m. Usually this sculpture is decorated with horizontal striped lines and few colors like blue, red, yellow and white. This event happens at the last day of the festival as *Dhuryodana* dies at the end of the war in *Mahabharatha*. Villagers prepare this reclining stature of *Dhuryodana* with shape of flat legs and chest which the actors use as stage while performing the fight between *Dhuryodana* and *Bhima*. Pots filled with red color, are buried at thighs of statue. While the two actors perform this scene on the reclining *Dhuryodhana's* statue, audience watch the performance by standing around the statue. Here other actors and musicians find a place side to *Dhuryodana's* statue to accompany the performance of this scene.

Two actors who portrays the characters of *Duryodana* and *Bheema*, perform this scene on the reclining statue. Once the act of breaking legs of *Duryodana* is performed by professional actors, all village folk smash the legs of the statue with long sticks. When the villagers smash the legs of the statue of *Duryodana*, red color water which symbolizes blood of *Dhuryodhana*, spills out from the pots that are buried in the thighs of statue. This spilled red color is applied to character *Draupadi's* hair by the villagers. Then the character *Draupadi* ties her hair to show that her revenge is fulfilled.

As I mentioned in *Arjuna's* penance, here also, audience experience the sense of touch. Here audience become the part of the performance. They destroy the statue's legs. They touch the red color and apply to *Draupadi's* character. Symbolically it shows that they are part of the war.

4. Space and Spectatorship in *Draupadi's* festival.

Performance space in *Draupadi's* festival is flexible and transformable with sacred and decorative materials. The famous British scenographer, Howard in her book '*What is scenography?*', writes "The creation of carefully made scale figures add the human dynamics to the empty space, for the use and manipulation of scale on the stage is a scenographic art that stretches space from the maximum to the minimum to give it meaning(2)." In some events of *Draupadi's* festival the theatrical space and ritual space are not separable. Each space is designed with the previous experience of the villagers. The experience is not documented, but conventionally passed on to next generation through elders. This is how the performance space in *Draupadi's* festival, both interior and exterior, is minimized with sacred material to give it meaning.

According to Pramela Howard, every space has a line of power, reaching from the acting area to the spectator that the scenographer has to reveal and explore(Howard, 2009, p.1). Officially, there is no scenographer in *Draupadi's* festival performances, but devotees convert the available space into performance space where you see the 'line of power'. The interior and exterior space of *Draupadi's* festival are conceived by both actors and spectators. There is no division of space in this festival performances. Except in event of *Arjuna's* penance, all the events are performed in the public with spectators being part of it. Before the performance begins, the performance space of this festival is enriched by flood lights, decorative bulbs, torches and lamps, all spread around the premises.

To witness other events in *Draupadi's* festival audience move from one designated space to other. Different events like *Draupadi's* marriage which happens in the interior of temple, *Arjuna's* penance which happens in the temple premises, and *Uttara-Gograhanam* which happens in the

paddy fields are the best examples for this. In *Draupadi's* festival, role of the architectural and performance space assume same equivalence. During the time of religious theatrical performance, one can see temple, chariot of the goddess, *Veedhi natakau* performance stage, and vendor's shops, people moving and children playing. We are not sure to what extent it disturbs or engages audience to watch this ritual theatre performances. In proscenium stage, during the performance, wings, proscenium arch, and other things are partially visible. It is clear that during the performance in proscenium stage, audience attention is drawn by lights, scenery and costumes. But in *Draupadi's* festival, performers get attention with the sound of loud music instrument, enriched costumes and the loud voice of actors.

Pamela Howard noticed Edward Gordon Craig saying "designer should design with their feet as well as with their hands", emphasizes the importance of walking and feeling the space, always looking to see how it can be molded so that the actors are presented as clearly as if a human being has never been seen before. Who is the designer in *Draupadi's* festival? Without designer, do we think that the performance space in *Draupadi's* festival is thinkable to organize such a way? The villagers do the designer's job.

Events like *Draupadi's* festival, Arjuna's penance have multiple levels of performance space. In the beginning of this event, performer use horizontal space, gradually the performers change performance space from horizontal to vertical. Here the visual focus also changes from horizontal to vertical. In these events performers are closely surrounded by audience. This horizontal space is direct and intimate, but not in vertical space.

According to Jerome Maekelbergh scenography is the adaptation of a given space for a theatrical happening (Howard, 2009, p.xiii). To perform *Veedhi natakamu*, it does not demand any special space. The performers are capable to perform in any empty space. It is observed that they adopt paddy field, temple premises, and village roads to perform.

A scenographer in fact creates the visual text from the playwright's verbal text; Pamela Howard writes: "Language is completely central to theatre, and my commitment has always been to use scenography to enhance and reveal the text and the story behind it (Howard, 2009, p.17)." Spectators and performers of *Draupadi's* festival know the story of *Mahabharatha* and most of them are well aware of the scenes and dialogues. In my understanding the unseen role of the scenographer is done by the devotees. They design the space to enhance and reveal the text and story behind it. All the open area ritual theatrical performances which I mentioned, are performed in the space where you can separate performers and spectators based on color. Spectators and performers in *Draupadi's* festival are together. The make-up, costumes and props supports the performers to lure the spectator's attention.

In *Draupadi's* open area theatre performances, spectators do not stay seated. They move along the performers to watch other scene in other space. In some scenes, spectators move back to give acting space for the performers. In some cases the spectators deliver verse with the chorus. In his book *Theatricality and medium*, using the analogy of Plato's Republic, Weber draws the following things: with his fixed position, the spectator's visual experience is limited; except the shadows and light of the fire, the cave is dark for chained prisoners in Plato's Republic; As prisoners see the shadows in Plato's Republic, the spectators see shadows in the place of figures.

Based on this notion, I could draw following things in *Draupadi's* festival.

In *Draupadi's* ritual theatre, the position of the spectators is devotion.

1. Except sacred material and performers of Veedhinatakmu, everything is dark (not considerable) for these spectators and devotees.
2. As prisoners see the shadows in Plato's Republic, the spectators and devotees see the devotion, belief and sacred material.

5. Conclusion:

Irrespective of culture, we should invite the new theatre concepts and understand it through our indigenous roots. Young theatre practitioners has to notice the design elements in Indian traditional theatre. In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that the rituals of Draupadi's festival have always, in sense, been a global ritual. When we examine Draupadi's ritual theatre, we can trace many similarities with Greek, medieval, and Asian ritual theatres. Draupadi's ritual theatre, as I have discussed in this paper, is a form of mediated community representation which is determined by the specific ritual context of the public space in which it occurs. Scenography has relationship with religion, ritual and other forms of representation expressed by human beings. Thus scenography can simply be traced in different Indian ritual theatre forms.

Notes

¹ *Harikatha* is a solo narrative form in *Andhra Pradesh*

² In Mahaharatha, Bakasura Terrorised the city of Eakchakra.

³ The weapons of the Pandavas are kept on *Jammi* tree.

⁴ The *Pashupatastra* is an irresistible and most destructive personal weapon of Lord Shiva.

⁵ *Indra Keeladri* is a hill where the *Arjuna* had penaced upon Lord Siva to obtain the deadly weapon, the Pasupatha.

⁶ *Prasadam* is vegetarian food that has been spiritualised by being offered to god.

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