

## The Art Of Theatrical Backdrops: 1901-1960 - A Succinct Survey

Sponsored by  
Mumbai Metropolitan Regional- Heritage Conservation Society

By  
Dr. Amol Divkar,  
Director, Niteeka Archival Research Infotech Pvt. Ltd.





Front Cover: Scenic Backdrop by artist V. V. Divkar exclusively for the drama series Shivshambo promoted by V. Shantaram.

Wayfarer Musicians. From Artist V. V. Divkar's sketchbook.





Courtesy- FTII Movie Poster





Ornamental embellishment on a pillar structure. Sketch by Artist V. V. Divkar.



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From the Manoranjan Collection, Pune. A View of a Purana Mahal.

*Inspired by and dedicated  
to  
Tara Vasudev Dirkar and Vasudev Vitthal Dirkar, Artist  
with  
fond memories for the cultural inculcation.*



## FOREWORD

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are thankful to the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional- Heritage Conservation Society for their support and keen interest in this subject and the resultant grant which motivated us to initiate the project. This is the first time MMR- HCS has funded a project of this type. A chance meeting with Dr. Allana and his interest in 'Painted Sceneries' has to be acknowledged with a word of thanks. We are ever so indebted to the Chairman and Managing Director of Niteeka, Professor Abhay Vasant Arolkar for providing unflinching support to this endeavour.

Moreover, we would like to thank the entire Managing Committee of the MMR- HCS including Dr. Malini Krishnakutty- the Secretary and Conservation Architect Shreeamey Phadnis for providing guidance and advice on this pioneering subject. We are also grateful to Shreeamey for the assistance provided to us during Pune visits. We also thank Dr. Malini for gifting a copy of Dr. Allana's book 'Painted Sceneries' to us. We would like to thank Ar. Prasad Shetty and Ar. Shalini Singh for supporting the project.

We would like to thank Advocate Rahul Deodhar for his suggestions and techno artistic analysis of the drawings and paintings of theatrical backdrops of the artist V. V. Divkar. We thank the Department of Cultural Affairs for giving us the opportunity to meet with them several times for valuable references. Thanks to Mrs. Asha Pillai for photographs of paintings obtained from her private collection.

We would like to thank the quintessential Deepak Rao for his help in our research. We thank litterateur Dr. Shanta Gokhale who provided sound advice on structuring the project. We would also like to extend a special vote of thanks to Dr. Nissar Allana through whose book 'Painted Sceneries', several references and images of theatrical curtains by scenic artists including those of the artist V. V. Divkar were perused and adapted; grateful to Dr. P. P. Shirodkar for his book 'Hon. Jagannath Shankarsheth' for the valuable references.

We had the opportunity to visit various institutes in Mumbai and Pune concerning theatrical backdrops and the research content required for it. While all the organizations were very helpful, notable among those are Mumbai Archives with the proactive help of Shri Susheel Garze- the Director of Archives, Mrs. Bhalerao- the Archivist and all the support staff at the Mumbai Archives. Managed by Dr. Anjali Kale, Assistant Librarian, Varsha Deodhar, Junior Librarian and their team, we thank the University of Mumbai library, Fort Campus, which continues to be a haven for rare books. The library at NCPA-National Center for the Performing Arts has an excellent collection for sources on drama and film. We thank their librarian Ms. Jadhav, a special mention is made of Mr. Patel, the Library Assistant. We thank Dr. Bipin Chandra, ASI Western Region Director for guidance on administrative matters.

## Acknowledgements

Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh along with its dynamic Secretary Shri Shubash Bhagwat has been of tremendous help. Thanks to him, we could prepare digital images of over 25 theatrical backdrops of MMSS. Shri Shubash Bhagwat along with his active assistants has been championing the cause of furthering theatrical backdrops and has even taken steps for conservation of a few deteriorated curtains in his own inimitable style.

In Pune, we received much co-operation through the good offices of Bal Gandharva Rang Mandir, Bharat Natya Sanshodhan Mandir, Tilak Smarak Mandir, Yashwantrao Chavan Natya Gruha, Film and Television Institute of India and National Film Archive of Pune. We would especially like to thank Mr. Mohan Kulkarni of Manoranjan and his staff Mr. Ravi Patil and his assistants for showing us the theatrical curtains that they still retain and providing us with valuable information, both verbal and graphic, about the theatrical curtains. We are thankful to Onkar Abhyankar for photographic services.

For every organization and institution, graceful thanks are mentioned here for any form of task force handling the backdrops or reference materials. Towards the finishing stage, we acknowledge with thanks Upasana Pandey who specially assisted to design the book. We thank the University of Mumbai, Dept. of Theatre and Arts for their assistance.

We are deeply obliged to Smt. Shobha Shripad Divkar and Shri. Shripad Vasudev Divkar for their loving care of the artist V. V. Divkar's painting collection in spite of trying times. Mrs. Tilaka Joseph and Mr. Daniel Trevelyan Joseph are our perennial well-wishers officially and personally.

A Research project of such a vast nature requires well-wishers and assistance from all corners. Should there be a persona or institution by oversight failed to get a mention here, we sincerely hold ourselves responsible. But do remember, all the acknowledged thanks or otherwise emanate from the depth of our heart and is intended to be forever.



## PREFACE

The gentleman sat on a Saturday in front of the bank manager wearing his signature kurta waiting to collect his demand draft. On being queried regarding his profession by the then manager of the Bank of India, Napean Sea Road Branch, the late Shri Ashok Kundaikar, he mentioned that he was writing a research paper on 'Theatrical Backdrops.' Pat came the reply from the Bank Manager- "Then you must have heard of the scenic artist V. V. Divkar." The gentleman replied "Yes, I have only heard of V. V. Divkar, as of date, he is just a footnote in my research paper." The gentleman was stunned to know that the Bank Manager was aware of the scenic artist. The gentleman in question is Dr. Nissar Allana. In our subsequent meeting in Mumbai in August 2005, he expressed his intentions to publish his book 'Painted Sceneries.' We both emphasized the fact that the time had come to study Theatrical Backdrops and in the process, identify scenic painters as more than a footnote. By sheer dint of effort, the resultant outcome has been this publication 'The Art of Theatrical Backdrops.'

More than due diligence has been done on histories, art and culture of film-making, dramaturgy and allied subjects. Whenever we peruse these publications or documents, we come across only passing references to scenic painters and theatrical backdrops. Not that there was any lack of interest, but probably this subject may have had its own limitations. Hurdles come in the path of research progress in various ways. In this case, some in the form of resistance to studying nouveau concepts like theatrical backdrops, others due to lack of scientific documentation on the subject itself, some others because the Natya organizations no longer have their collection of curtains. Initially, many were not inclined to grant basic access to view and study the scenic paintings.

Thus, to explore further avenues, the book 'Painted Sceneries' became the mainstay of reference source. We were motivated to delve deeper for content material on the subject. It is to be emphasized here that sparse contribution has been made on this subject both nationally and internationally. In India, we have publications such as Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni's 'New Directions in the Marathi Theatre' that briefly speak of theatrical backdrops as a reference. Libraries, Archives, Museums have repeatedly expressed their inability to find publications on theatrical backdrops. Even though the media has showered considerable attention pertaining to drama and films, it has yet to do so in the case of theatrical backdrops. Thus 'painted sceneries' provides an exemplary idea.

It shall be observed as we read on that the roots of Marathi Sangeet Natya have always been in ancient Sanskrit dramaturgy and folk traditions while its essence may include the combination of Indian and Western literary cultures. This again brings about the amalgamation of Character Acting and Theatrical Art on the stage.

At times relevant graphic images were not access able. Further, some downloads from the internet do not carry the density in a formatted image. Hence, when reproduced it displays pixel dilution.

As the third sketchbook of artist V. V. Divkar was discovered in Goa much later, graphic references from the sketchbook have been shown in the Appendices with explanatory text.

In this book on theatrical backdrops, a humble attempt has been made to convey the concepts as well as the processes involved in creating backdrops in an elementary sense. As the artists had the knowledge to render a theatrical curtain, they also needed to possess the necessary skills to render that knowledge on the large canvas. Scenic painters had to be able to transform that piece of art on the canvas of a larger size and yet retain its intrinsic, artistic and utilitarian value.

## CHAPTER 1 : GLIMPSES OF THE THEATRE



1.1 Artists view of English Theatrical Backdrops. The above painting is from the late 19th Century filler drawing used for practice renderings of colors and cut-light effects, art of drapery on stage costumes by scenic painters. Artist V. V. Divkar. From the private collection of Mrs. Asha Pillai.

**T**heatre in its very essence is universally popular. In India too, every region with its diverse culture had some form of dramatic depiction alongwith theatrical backdrops. Primarily, the backdrop sets would vary in sizes from 15 ft x 25 ft upto 18 ft x 35 ft. These would show palaces, streets, dense forests and drapery. It would effectively display the architectural form of depth and distance and artistically convey the use of color schemes to illuminate light and shade effects. Thus, assist in depicting the varying dramatic moods.



The term theatre has many connotations but commonly refers to a drama performed in an amphitheatre or an auditorium. It also refers to the profession of the theatrical art as a whole. The word theatre has its origins in Latin 'theatrum' and Greek 'theatron'<sup>1</sup> which refers to space, stage and the audience. The Greek theatre is said to have begun in the 5th century BCE.<sup>2</sup> However, hardly five generations ago, this term would have selectively recalled the scene of a drama theatre in the collective consciousness of the people.

In the course of time, the semantics of this word was eventually incorporated not only into the English language but also for its counterpart in Italian, Spanish and French. It is to be observed here that the viewers and the act of them seeing the performance in particular has been given a place of prominence. It is true, for without an audience to perform for, enacting a play would indeed seem quite meaningless. In essence, we can simply say that the theatre primarily exists for the viewer.

The Greek theatre initially consisting of only an altar surrounded by open space eventually developed into a circular format with an orchestra for the performers at the center, surrounded with rows of tiered seats. Also, a separate tent acted as the dressing room for the performers.<sup>3</sup> The Roman theatre came into existence in the first century BCE; the Roman theatre is credited with the introduction of the platform stage with painted scenery at the back.<sup>4</sup> This can be considered as one of the earliest references to theatrical painted sceneries so far.

India, since times immemorial always had a rich theatrical tradition. This can be seen from the references found in Sanskrit literature to the folk traditions of the present day. Patanjali's grammatical treatise titled 'Mahabhasya' or the 'Great Commentary' is the earliest unique reference found in Sanskrit literature to Indian theatre. It refers to the preliminary practices associated with the Indian dramatic tradition.<sup>5</sup> However, the most significant work with regards to theatrics would be Bharatmuni's Natyasashtra. Belonging to the period circa 200 BCE,<sup>6</sup> it is considered to be a complete treatise on dramaturgy. In fact, it is found to be of relevance to the theatre practitioners even today.<sup>7</sup>

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1 "Theatre- Definition. Merriam-Webster. See URL in Bibliography.

2 Shirodkar, P.P. "Hon. Jagannath Shankarsheth. Prophet of India's Resurgence and Maker of Modern Bombay. Pradnya - Darshan Prakashan, Goa. 2005. Vol. I. p 590. Henceforth, to be referred as "Shirodkar".

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Shekar, Indu. Sanskrit Drama: Its Origin and Decline. Leiden: Brill Archive. See URL in Bibliography.

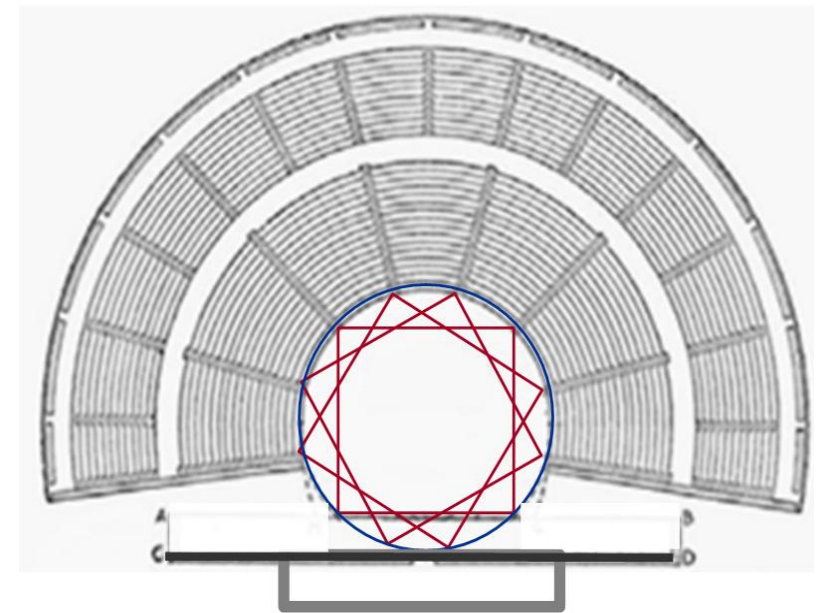
6 Nilakanthan, Gouri. "Natyasastra: The Timeless Classic." Live History India website. See URL in Bibliography.

7 Ibid.

Besides the above-mentioned authors, the Sanskrit playwright Bhavabhuti,<sup>8</sup> who thrived in the first half of the 8th century CE, is also considered as a great Indian dramatist next to only Kalidasa in terms of his literary prowess. His noteworthy works include the three plays, namely the *Malatimadhava*, *Mahaviracharita* and *Uttar Ramacharita*.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, we also have Kalidasa, traditionally thought to belong to circa 5th century BCE<sup>10</sup>, who is considered to be probably the greatest Sanskrit dramatist from the ancient world. Three famous romantic plays namely the *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramurvasiya* and *Abhijnanashakuntalam* are among his notable works. *Abhijnanashakuntalam* or 'the Recognition of Shakuntala' was the first play to be translated into English and German. Its English translation is said to have influenced the noted German writer Goethe's magnum opus 'Faust' (1808 -1832)<sup>11</sup>.



1.2 Postcards depicting Shakuntala. Private collection of Shri V. V. Divkar.



1.2a Classical Greek Amphitheatre, circa 450 BC

8 Gupta, Rama. "A Critical Estimate of Bhavabhuti and His Works." Kolkata: University of Calcutta. 1977. Shodhganga website. See URL in Bibliography.

9 Ibid.

10 Bhat, Dattatraya S. "The Samvadas in Panchamahakavyas: A Critical Study." Dharwad: Karnatak University. 2000. See URL in Bibliography.

11 "How Kalidasa's Works Reached Germany." Indian Review Magazine website. Published on 23/12/2018. See URL in Bibliography.

From the tradition of ancient Sanskrit drama and literature, are derived the various forms of folk theatre in India, many of which still continue up to the present day. Such forms of folk theatre have been described by the author Kathryn Hansen as “the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition,”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, they are relevant even to this day. As is said regarding the influence of folk theatre, “Even where modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change.”<sup>13</sup>

Sanskrit dramas are classical dance dramas in a poetic form.<sup>14</sup> Rooted in the Sanskrit dramas are folk traditions of India, which are essentially dance dramas that developed locally in different parts of India as a means of entertainment and education for the rural folk. Elements like the inaugural prayer song or ‘Naman’, the court jester or ‘Vidushak’, the manager of the play or the ‘Sutradhar’, music, group singing, playing of drums, use of masks and costumes are all influences derived from the tradition of the Sanskrit dramas.<sup>15</sup>



1.3 Modern-day image of the cast of a play from the Marathi Sangeet Natak tradition performing the customary Naman or Inaugural prayer song at the beginning of the play.

The background shows a scenic curtain by the artist V.V. Divkar depicting a garden. Courtesy -Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha, Mumbai.

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12 Hansen, Kathryn. “Indian Folk traditions and the Modern Theatre.” Asian Folklore Studies. Nagoya: Nanzan University, 1983. Vol. 42, No. 1, p. 77 - 89. See URL in Bibliography.

13 Das, Sheelita. “Folk Theatre - Its Relevance in Development Communication in India.” Global Media Journal - Indian Edition. Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 2013. Vol 04, No. 2. See URL in Bibliography.

14 Shirodkar, p. 586.

15 Shirodkar, p. 587.



Among the prevailing forms of folk theatre traditions, are the Ankiya Naat and Bhawana from Assam, Swang-Nautanki from Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh, Khayal from Rajasthan, Jatra from Bengal, Ras Lila also originating from Uttar Pradesh, Tamasha from Maharashtra, Bhavai from Gujarat, Yakshagana from Karnataka, and Kathakali from Kerala. In fact, the inspiration for the concept of the very first of the Marathi Natak plays was derived by Vishnudas Bhawe, the Father of Marathi Natak, from the Yakshagana folk tradition.<sup>16</sup> Kuttilyattam, an earlier form of Sanskrit folk theatre in which originate other folk traditions from Kerala,<sup>17</sup> has been officially designated by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.<sup>18</sup>

Specifically referring to the region of Maharashtra, the 1st century CE<sup>19</sup> cave inscriptions of the Satavahana queen Gautami Balashri speaks of her son, Gautamiputra Satakarni as having organised Utsava and Samaja, forms of dramatic entertainment in ancient times, for his subjects.<sup>20</sup> Maharashtra also projects a rich tradition of folk-theatre forms, like Dashavatara, Lalit, Tamasha, Gondhal, Bohada, Vasudev, Keertan and puppetry shows. Entrenched in Indian cultural traditions, these folk forms were and still are a prevalent popular medium of recreation among the masses. The seeds of Marathi theatre are also said to have germinated from these folk theatrical forms.<sup>21</sup> With such profound basis in cultural traditions of folk theatre, Marathi Sangeet Natya came into existence in the 19th century. With exposure to Western theatrical influences, Marathi Sangeet Natya shaped a configuration and refinement in entertainment that became very popular in the 19th and 20th centuries in Western India. In the process, channeled to a greater degree the concept of Theatrical Backdrops.

In the 19th century, various theatrical or Natak companies came into existence. These Companies implemented the staging of plays in the proscenium theatres for the increasingly urbanized masses. Such companies employed the use of various theatrical features like set and stage design, lighting, costume, etc. The arrival of the painted cloth scenic backdrops in India for the stage can be traced to this period. Huge back-drops were created to illustrate the location of the drama in-situ in order to create an ambience while providing a context to an ongoing act of the play. This was done chiefly to aid and engage the imagination of the masses and help transport their mind onto the scene being performed.

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16 Allana, Nissar. "Painted Sceneries. Backdrops of the 19th Century Marathi Sangeet Natak." The New Delhi Press, New Delhi. 2007. p. 18. Henceforth, to be referred as Allana.

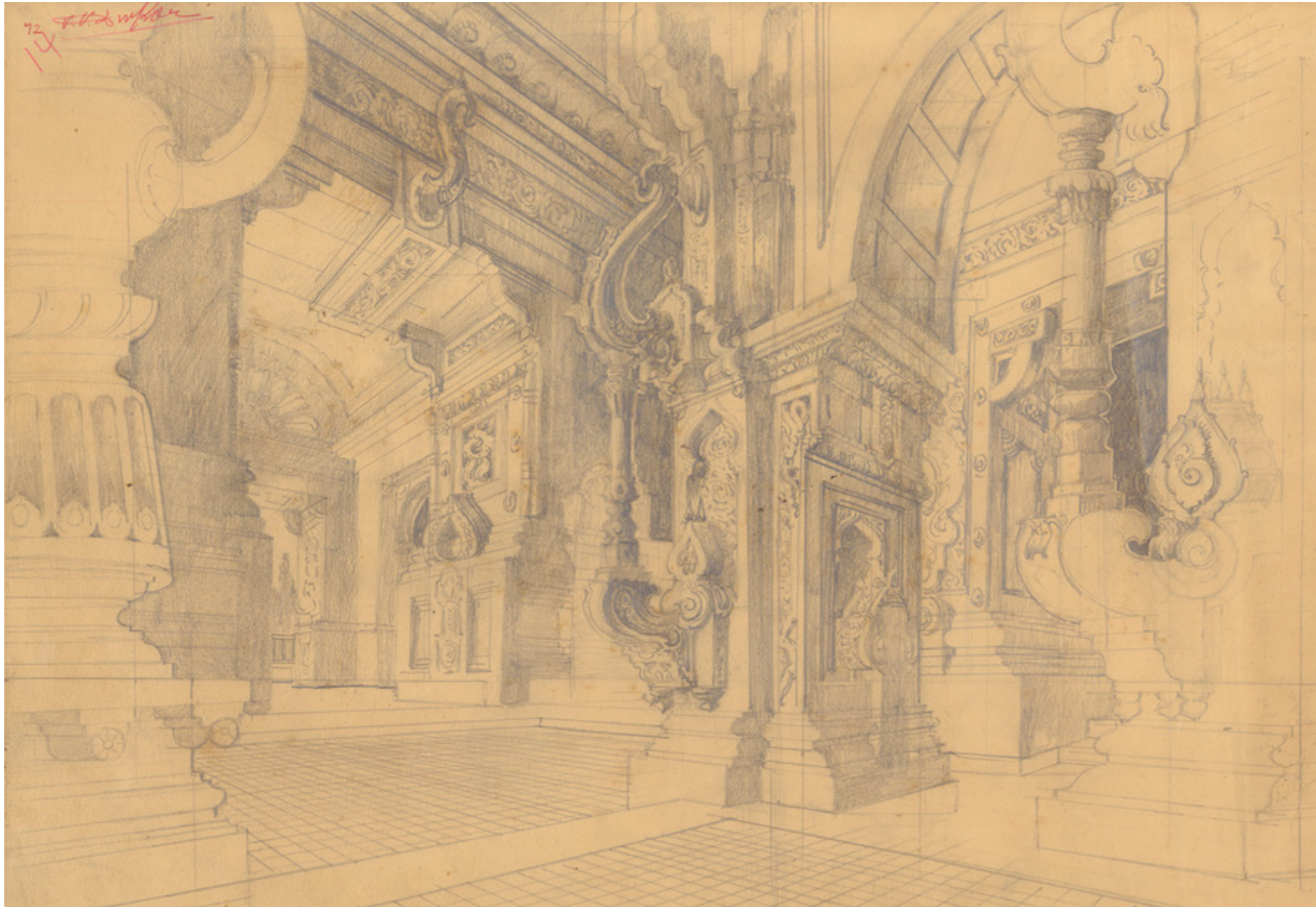
17 "Kutiyattam." UNESCO Kutiyattam website. See URL in Bibliography.

18 Gopal, Sudha. "Kuttilyattam as World Heritage." The Hindu. Online edition dated July 01, 2001. See URL in Bibliography.

19 "Pandulena, Nasik." Ticketed Monuments - Maharashtra, Archaeological Survey of India website. See URL in Bibliography.

20 Varadpande, Manohar L. "History of Indian Theatre." Vol 2. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications. 1992. See URL in Bibliography.

21 "Marathi Vishwakosh." Edited by Shri Laxmanshastri Joshi. Maharashtra Rajya Marathi Vishwakosh Nirmiti Mandal. Mumbai, Vol. 14, 1989. p. 1,223. Henceforth to be referred to as Marathi Vishwakosh.



1.4. Artist's impression of a stage design for a drama in ancient times. From the sketchbook drawings of Shri. V. V. Divkar

As to how this imagery were woven around were to be seen in the year 2007, in an exhibition titled 'Painted Sceneries.' In this Exhibition were displayed 19th century scenic curtains and rare photographs pertaining to the Marathi Sangeet Natya to the audience.<sup>22</sup> It was curated by Dr. Nissar Allana, who has also authored a book with the same title. This exhibition included "a kaleidoscopic view of a golden era of popular theatre that is recognized as the beginnings of the modernist movement in contemporary Indian theatre" and "documents, so vividly, part of the history relatedly, of Indian art and studio photography."<sup>23</sup>

An online blog post regarding the book 'Painted Sceneries' states - "A major part of the attractiveness of this new form of city entertainment (i.e. Marathi Sangeet Natya) was its use of scintillating backdrops that could magically transport audiences to several opulent locations with the quick change of backdrops from scene to scene. From lush gardens to monumental palaces, from middle class homes to poverty-stricken huts, from forts to dungeons... scene painters became much sought after by major theatre companies." These events were extremely helpful to bring about a hitherto unknown artistic realm to light.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the Art of Theatrical Backdrops can now be viewed as being contributive to this individual genre of art while each cloth curtain is established as a valuable work of art, slowly garnering the interest of art lovers and academicians alike; however, the need of the hour is to spread the seeds of knowledge about this art form among the masses as well. Therefore, this book is written with the hope that it will provide well-researched information on this subject to a variety of people ranging from the layman to the professional.

This book restricts itself to focus on the painted sceneries and scenic painters from the realm of the Marathi theatre. Herewith, a chapter wise attempt has been made to briefly chart the changing path of the theatrical curtains and the artists scenario in Maharashtra, using primary and literary sources. This shall enable us to provide a historical context for the art of theatrical backdrops. Furthermore, an attempt to evaluate the art of the theatrical backdrops has been made, based on analytical deductions from artworks. Primarily the sources for this study since available have been selected from the artworks of V. V. Divkar, one of the leading theatrical scenic painters of the time, and various other curtain paintings, photographic images, postcards and private collections.

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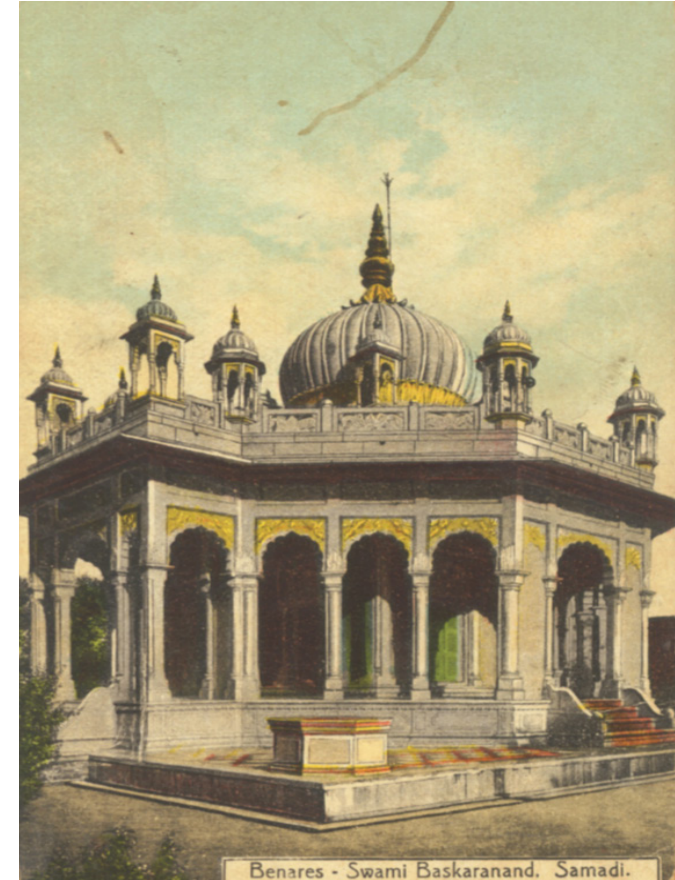
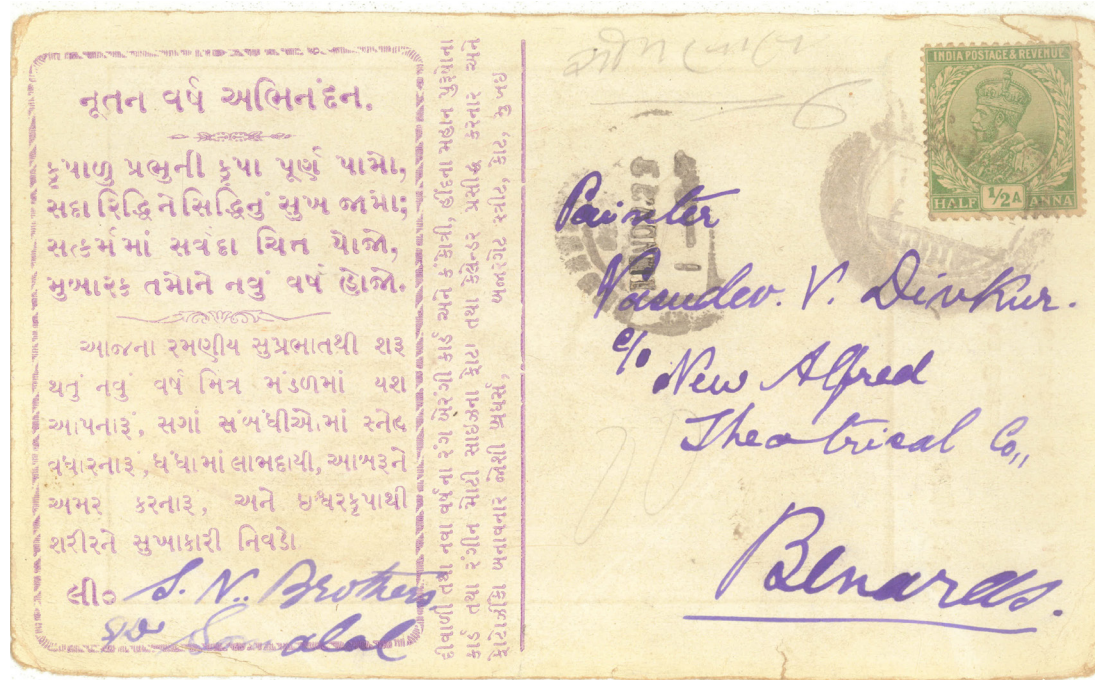
<sup>22</sup> "Painted Sceneries, 2007." Theatre & Television Associates website - Homepage. See URL in Bibliography.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> In the year 1992, the Nehru Planetarium had an exhibition on the K.T. Deshmukh Collection. This collection is invaluable for it contained backdrops by various artists. The author then had the opportunity to view at least three backdrops painted by the artist V.V. Divkar.



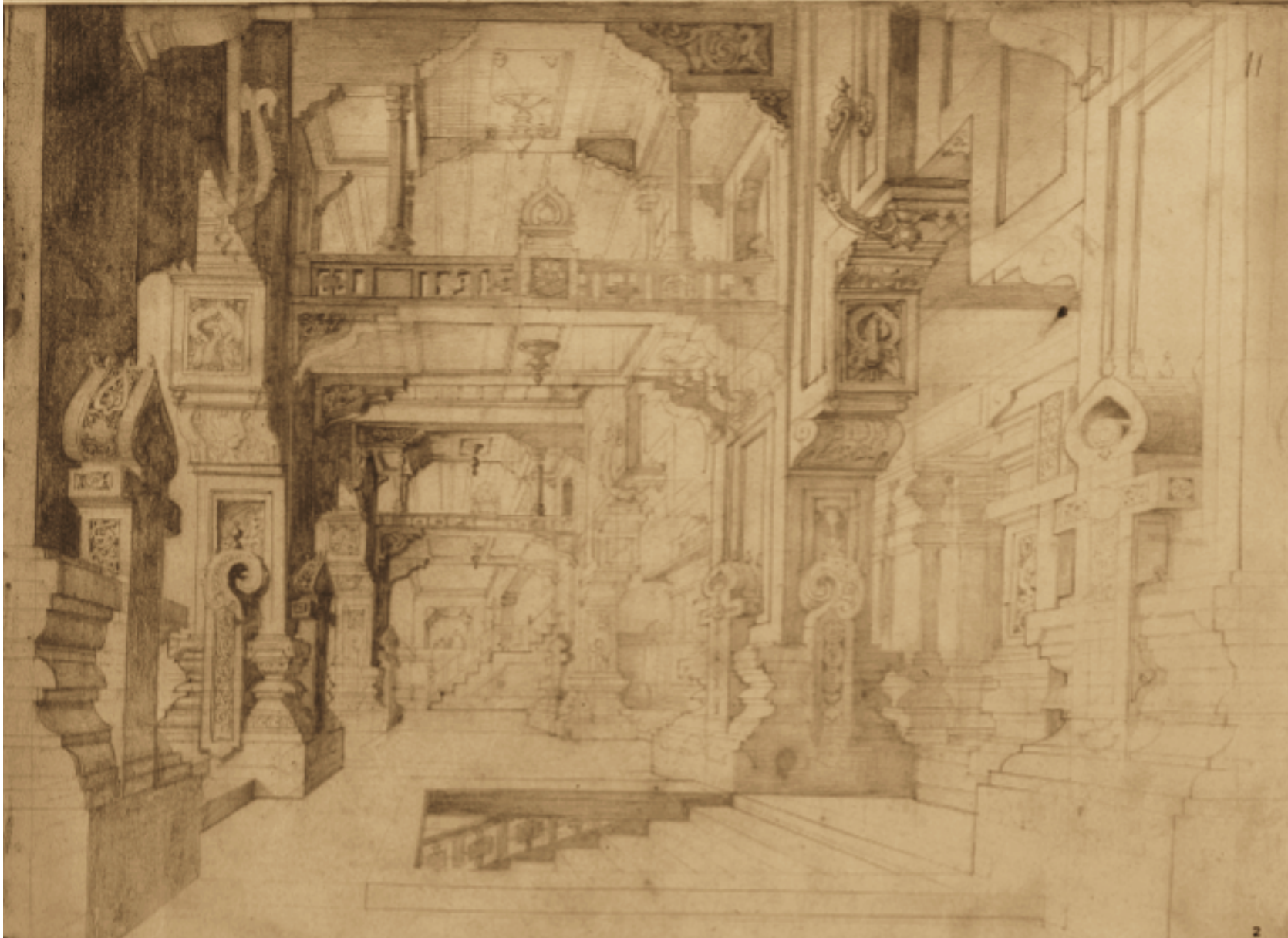
The current trend in the contemporary art scene is the rising interest in the paraphernalia left behind by the artist and not just his artworks. It is now been recognized that such material is of an archival grade and throw much light on the life of an artist, namely on the “artist behind the artwork.”<sup>25</sup> As a newspaper article in recent times states - “Locked inside dusty steel cupboards and torn file covers, sepia-tinted fragments of artists’ lives recorded in letters, notes and photographs are now drawing as much attention as the art themselves.”<sup>26</sup>



- 1.5 Postcard showing V. V. Divkar's association with New Alfred Theatrical Company  
 1.6 (Right) Swami Baskaranand's Samadi at Benares showing Hindu Architecture.

25 Vandana Kalra. “Things They Left Behind.” The Sunday Express Magazine. Indian Express. Dated 19/06/2018.

26 Ibid.



1.7 Pencil drawing for proposed curtain by Artist V. V. Divkar sourced from his sketchbook.  
See page 204 for graphics analysis.



In the same article, Hugo Weihe, former CEO of Saffron Art quotes - “People are now interested in the context and creation of the artwork. In our catalogues too, we try to put as many archival photographs from the period - invites, catalogues, newspaper clippings - that adds a lot of context to the creation of a particular work of art in a particular moment in time and how it was received and recognized.” Indeed, such archival material throws further light on the life and thought processes of the artists and their artworks, and it provides researchers and archivists sources “to map personal histories alongside the trajectory of the Indian Art scene.”<sup>27</sup>

The artist V. V. Divkar left behind notably five practice sketch books among other artworks; out of these five, three were located; the other two are, unfortunately, lost to posterity. We have access to the three sketch books and five paintings by V. V. Divkar from a private collection. Such material is, therefore, becoming more valuable by the day and is soon gaining the status of collectors’ items. Artist Divkar’s works have been mainly used to juxtapose the text and graphics to essentially try and arrive at the practical considerations required in creating this form of art. These postcards from the private collection of V. V. Divkar show various architectural images. The treasury of such collections provided motivational strength for both practice and its implementation.

To add strength to the earlier statement, let us look at an image of a curtain from a prominent book on scenic paintings. Reported as one of the oldest curtains we feel this effort should enables the author to identify the scenic painter.



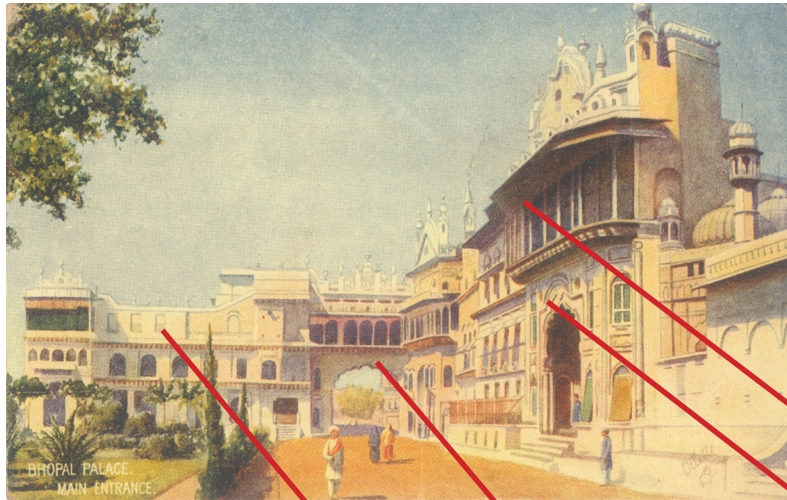
1.8 Bhopal Palace, Main Entrance. The Citadel walls afford a fine view of the lake and surrounding country. Similarity of architectural elements depicted on the curtain shown above.



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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.





Comparing the postcard and the scenic curtain image shown below, we find that the Bhopal Palace postcard shows a range of architectural renderings along the Citadel walls. Also, similarity of the structural drawings on the scenic curtain can be observed too. It is interesting to note, that the image of the scenic curtain is from Dr. Allana's book "Painted Sceneries" (page 12-13), while the postcard is from the artist V. V. Divkar's collection. Analytically speaking, it would not be out of context to summarize that the scenic painter could possibly be the artist V. V. Divkar.



1.9 Indications show similarities of architectural rendering indicated by red lines.



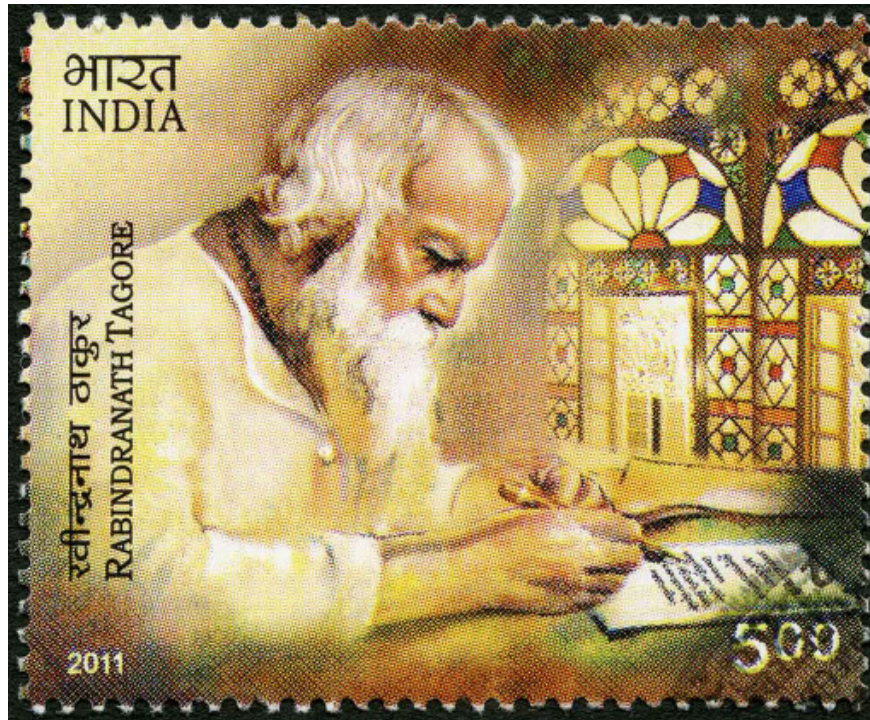
Thus, having observed the elements of the Theatre, we shall next see how the rise of Theatre Companies took place and alongwith scenic painters and their painted backdrops played a pivotal role. Thus, this book is in essence, an attempt to lay the groundwork to understand this Art of Backdrops and its various aspects. The scenic painting shown below gives an idea of the display of this Art.



1.10 A backdrop curtain depicting the interiors of a palace by Somnath Naik of Goa. Courtesy: Kala Academy, Panaji, Goa.



## CHAPTER 2 : RISE OF THE THEATRICAL COMPANIES



2.1 Images of Rabindranath Tagore and Kalyanam Raghuramaiah<sup>1</sup>

The theatre in its modern form originates from the time of the British colonial rule in India. Rabindranath Tagore is considered to be a pioneering playwright of the modern Indian theatre, having written plays in Bengali such as *Chitrangada* (1892), *Raja* (1910), *Dakghar* (1913), and *Raktakarabi* (1924). In the south of India, Kalyanam Raghuramaiah was an immensely famous actor, having performed in over 2,000 stage performances over a period of 20 years. He was awarded both the Sangeet Natak Akademi award and the Padmashri (1975). Tagore especially referred to him as ‘The Nightingale of the Stage’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See URL in Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> Marathi Vishwakosh. Vol. 14. p. 297.



Various factions of Europeans came to India. Among them, were the English traders who chose to stay in Bombay. Here, as a means of entertainment the English society which began as a small military settlement built the Bombay Theatre. Thus, the Bombay Amateur Theatre was established which can be traced back to the year 1776. The Theatre was located somewhere near the St. Thomas Cathedral and the Bombay Green, and was built with public subscription on a plot of land donated by the Government of Bombay.<sup>3</sup> The plot of land was earlier being used as a dumping ground.<sup>4</sup> The St. Thomas Cathedral still stands, with the Horniman Circle in place of the earlier Bombay Green. This period from 1776 to 1818 is considered to be the first phase of the theatre in Bombay. During this time, candles and oil lamps were used for lighting purposes. Further, the Bombay theatre used to hire the help of European scenic painters and carpenters from the Army to help create the stage set-up for plays.<sup>5</sup>



2.2 Town hall Bombay 1800's Fort Wall and Harbour with ship masts can be seen. The open ground in front of the Town Hall was known as Bombay Green where open air negotiation for cotton bundles and other export items took place. Internet source.

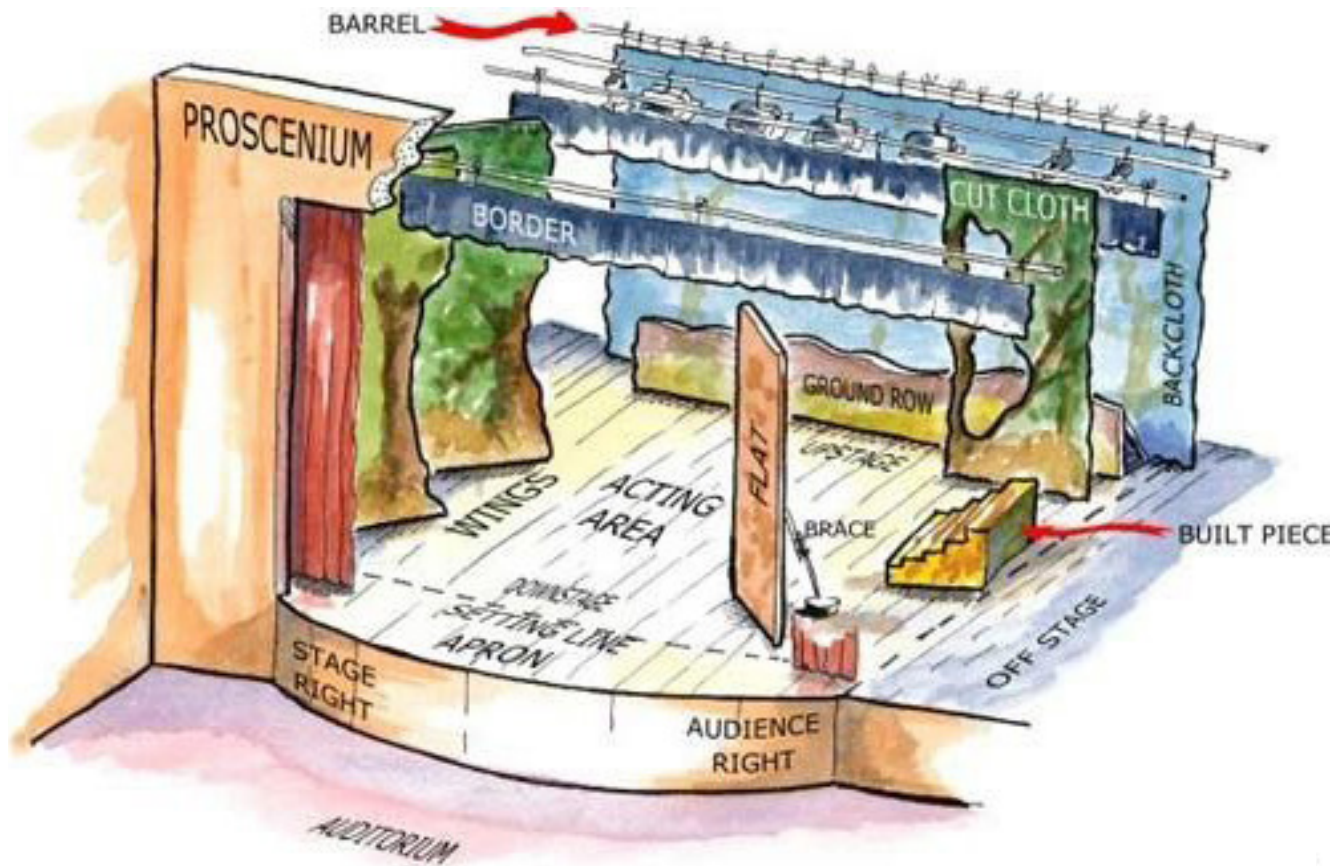
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3 Gupta, Somnath. "The Parsi Theatre. Its Origin and Development." Translated and edited by Kathryn Hansen. Calcutta: Seagull Books. 2005. p. 11. Henceforth referred as Gupta.

4 Shirodkar, p. 591.

5 Mehta, Kumudini A. "English Drama on the Bombay Stage in the Late Eighteenth Century and in the Nineteenth Century." Mumbai: University of Bombay. Unpublished Thesis. 1960. p. 147. Henceforth referred as Mehta.

The Theatre then fell into disrepair, was renovated in 1818 and reopened for business in the second phase in 1819 which continued upto 1835. Earlier in 1823, the Proscenium stage, with Corinthian pilasters at its edges, came to be used at the Theatre. It was described as a “neat and commodious structure.” When it was not being used for the Theatre, it was used to hold exhibitions and meetings, or even to store cotton.<sup>6</sup> During this flourishing phase, it was patronized by the then Governor Lord Mount Stuart Elphinstone.



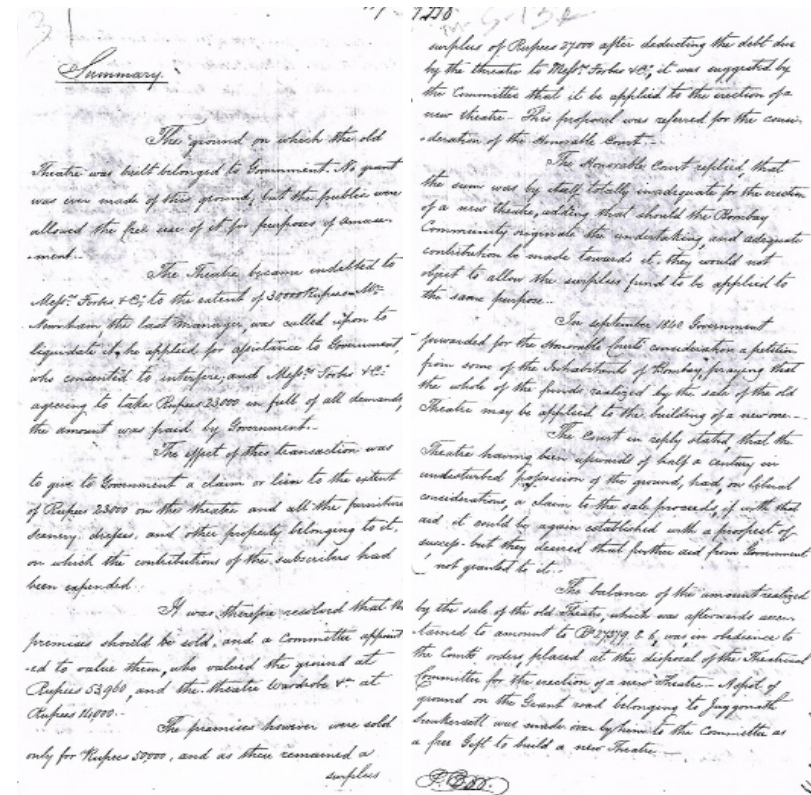
2.3 Depiction of the cross-section of the Proscenium theatre. This stage format was one of the biggest influences in the development of the Indian theatre during the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>7</sup> Copyright Brian Willis.

<sup>6</sup> Mehta. p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Courtesy: Internet source, See URL in Bibliography.

By 1830, the Theatre, having reached a state of dilapidation, needed repairs. A public subscription was launched to raise the required money. Among the list, were fifty Indian donors.<sup>8</sup> This, according to Dr. Kumudini Mehta, is a testament to the fact that the Theatre was being attended by Indians.<sup>9</sup> With their increasing numbers as an audience of the English theatre, the Indian crowds became oriented towards the Western form of theatre.<sup>10</sup> The English theatre hosted travelling English actors and companies, and "...brought inevitably in their trail the full conventions of Western theatrical systems of admission, techniques of advertisement and in the arrangements inside the play-house during the performances."<sup>11</sup>

However, the public subscription to raise sufficient funds in order to support restoration failed. It was then decided instead, to sell the building to Jamsethji Jeejeebhoy in 1835 for a sum of Rs. 50,000/-. During this time, the scenery, library and other items belonging to the Bombay Theatre were auctioned off by the Government of Bombay.<sup>12</sup> The theatre wardrobe was valued at Rs. 14,000/- at this time.<sup>13</sup> The Old Theatre was then used to store cotton.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, a petition was circulated asking the Government to utilize the funds left over from the sale of the Old Theatre to build a new one. The petition was signed by the then prominent citizens of Bombay like Jagannath Shankarsheth and Framjee Cowasji, among 453 other citizens.



2.4 Manuscript images showing references to footnotes no. 12 and 13

8 Mehta. p. 83. "The whole face of the theatre was plastered, the portico re-built, the entrance to the Dress Boxes was separated from the Upper Boxes, the interior of the house was repainted. White and color de rose were substituted for the deep red, blue and dismal green of former days. The panels of the Boxes were decorated with fanciful devices and regilt along with the Proscenium pillars. The Orchestra was enlarged while the outer rooms and stage apartments were repaired.

9 Mehta. p. 46. Earliest references of Indians attending the Amateur theatre from the period 1821- 1822.

10 Mehta. p. 24. Shakespeare's plays The Tragedy of Richard III, The Merchant of Venice, The Taming of the Shrew, Catherine and Petruchio were staged at the English theatre.

11 Mehta. p. iv.

12 Maharashtra State Archives, Bombay, General Department, Vol. 27/ 544/ 1840, Mss. Ref. dated 07/10/1840. Folio no. 87. Henceforth, referred as Gen. Dept.

13 Gen. Dept. Vol. 15/ 1853. Summary of Mss. Ref. dated 25/12/1853. Folio nos. 117 - 118. It is to be noted here that the Government owed Rs. 23,000/- to Messrs. Forbes & Co. that was loaned to the Managing Committee of the Bombay Theatre in a bid to make efforts to continue its activities. However, this was a futile attempt as the Theatre was defunct. The remainder of the amount i.e. Rs. 27,000/- was to be redirected to build the Bombay Theatre.

14 Shirodkar. p. 595.

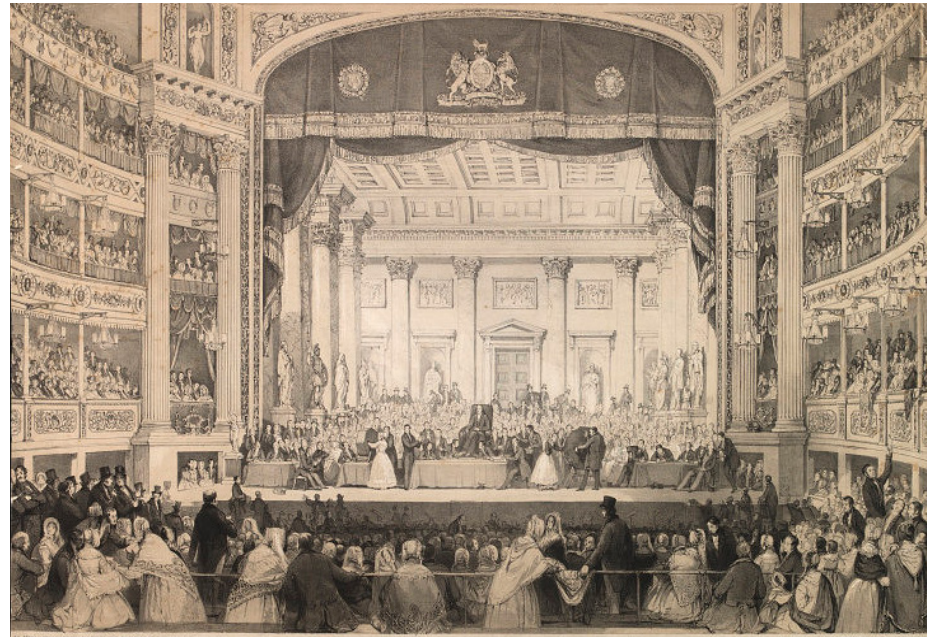
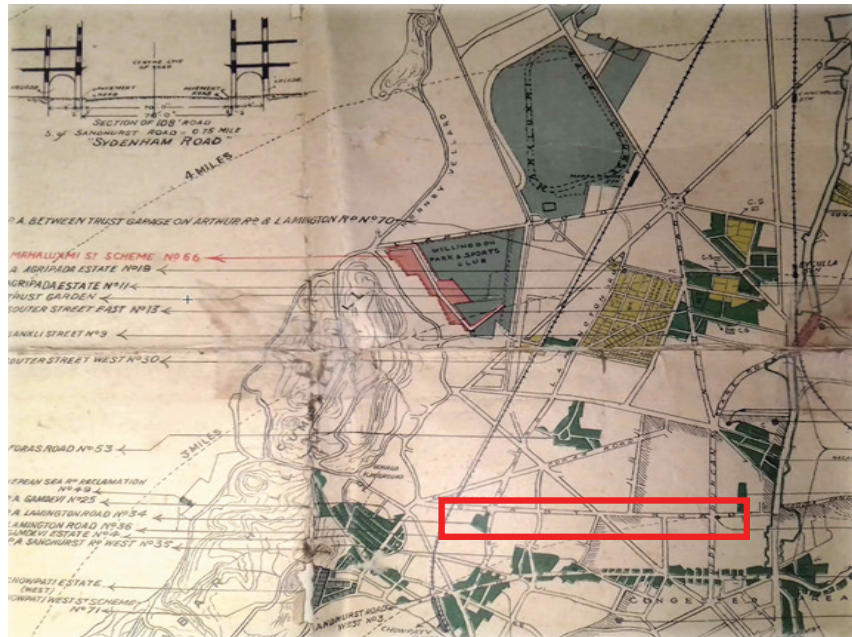




2.5 The Proscenium stage as seen at the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha. This theatre still continues to hold performances of Marathi Sangeet Natya and is located at Kelewadi, near Charni Road, Mumbai. Courtesy - MMSS.



At that time, the British Government were not in a position to refute the requests of such prominent citizens of Bombay. The petition turned out to be successful and a Theatrical Committee was set up to oversee the management of all affairs related to the New Theatre. Among its members were Jagannath Shankarsheth and Framji Cursetji. Due to the lack of funds, the Committee found it especially difficult to acquire a suitable plot of land to build the Theatre.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Shankarsheth voluntarily donated a plot of land on Grant Road for this purpose.<sup>16</sup> The plot of land was said to be located on the North side of the New Grant Road, somewhere between Bhindi Bazaar and Girgaum.<sup>17</sup>



2.6. Map of the Island of Bombay dated 1924 - 1925, depicting partly the Grant Road area. The Grant Road theatre, active during the time this map was made would have existed somewhere on the North side of Grant Road. Vicinity marked in red. Courtesy - Mumbai Archives.<sup>18</sup> The red box mentions Grant Road. See image of Drury Lane Theatre, London showing a Prize Distribution Ceremony.

15 Gen. Dept., Vol. 15/ 1853. Folio no. 117.

16 Gen. Dept., Vol. 15/ 1853. Folio no. 118. "A spot of ground on the Grant road belonging to Jugonnath Sunkersett was made over by him to the Committee as a free gift to build a new Theatre."

17 Shirodkar. p. 604.

18 MSA. Map of the Island of Bombay. Bombay Improvement Trust Map for Administrative Report, 1924 -25. Scale 1" =1,600 feet. (1 copy)

Thus, the Grant Road theatre came into existence in 1842. It was designed by a popular architect of the time, Captain Stuart, and was based on the design of the Drury Lane Theatre in London. It had the capacity to seat 337 audience members. Though the exteriors were not very striking, the interiors were said to have excellent arrangement wherein the stage was visible and voice of the actors audible to everyone in the auditorium.<sup>19</sup> The interiors were finished by acquiring a loan from Messrs. Remington and Co. The Theatre was inaugurated on February 10, 1846, which happened to be Shankarsheth's forty-third birthday.<sup>20</sup> It was also known as the Royal Theatre and the Shankarsheth play-house.<sup>21</sup>

The theatre was then leased out for management to Mrs. Deacle, a theatre actress who came to Bombay from Calcutta.<sup>22</sup> During the early days, while English plays were being performed at the Grant Road theatre, an amateur theatre group consisting of only European players, known as the Bombay Dramatic Society staged plays. The audiences, soon grew tired of such amateur acts which however ushered in the hiring of professional drama companies like the Lewis Drama Company, which became famous in Bombay in the 1870s.<sup>23</sup> Besides these, there were individual star performers like Dave Carson and Fairclough who were immensely popular with the masses, the former especially among the Parsis and the latter among native students.<sup>24</sup>

As the travelling theatre companies of the time did not carry heavy stage decoration the theatre had to maintain some stock of scenery. Often did they improvise on the stock of scenery available with the Grant Road Theatre. In 1846, Mrs. Deacle is said to have ordered a great amount of stage scenery from London, which was described as being in excellent taste, for the Grant Road theatre.<sup>25</sup> Gas lights were also introduced for the first time in the Grant Road theatre.<sup>26</sup> In 1873, 'London style of Box Scenery' was introduced here. This being a striking innovation at the time, it must have also been used for promotion of the theatre among the audience. Thus, we can see how even innovation in stage and interior design of the theatre could be used to attract more crowds at the time. Moreover, appreciation for stage scenery shows both the necessity and demand for stage backdrops as well as the prevalence of scenic paintings.

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19 Mehta. p. 145.

20 Shirodkar. p. 604.

21 Gupt. p. 24.

22 Mehta. p. 66.

23 Mehta. p. 168.

24 Mehta. p. 173.

25 Mehta. p. 147.

26 Mehta. p. 149.





2.7 Scenic curtain depicting flooding of light to bring about the night ambience. Courtesy MMSS collection.

Herein we should note, that stage accessories were acquired only as and when the funds were available.<sup>27</sup> Thus, due to the prevailing circumstances, the Theatre could not arrange for beautiful and striking stage sceneries all the time. Even though they had the example of a better and more elevated stage backdrops in use in theatres of London before them. This was periodically criticized in the newspapers of the time, along with the other shortcomings of the Theatre, namely faulty stage machinery, irrelevant character costumes, untrained scene shifters and even lighting.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mehta. p. 146.

<sup>28</sup> Mehta. p. 148.

The Grant Road theatre staged Western plays and was attended predominantly by the Europeans. The Native populace, however, were not yet attracted to this theatre. As a result, the Theatre could not generate the profits as was expected. The scenery and wardrobe of the Theatre soon became so worn out so as to warrant immediate replacement.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Committee, from time to time, had to invest in the maintenance of the stock of the stage scenery and wardrobe. Due to the scarcity of funds, the interiors were well decorated only on special occasions. In the course of time, the Theatre fell in debt, and the Theatrical Committee wrote to the Government asking for assistance, which was rejected.

In a letter written by the Chairman of the Bombay Theatrical Committee addressed to the Secretary to the Government, General Department in 1853, the following statement was made - "Para 8: The Theatre, however, is now in an excellent state of repair - the wardrobe and scenery are well-supplied..."<sup>30</sup> By this time the Theatre was bought by Shankarsheth in order to keep it from being defunct. Further, Indians were trained to perform as well as handle technical aspects related to the Theatre.<sup>31</sup> Also being situated in the Native Town and due to the long distance from their homes, the English were losing interest in the Grant Road theatre, especially after 1846.<sup>32 33</sup> Gradually, the numbers of the native crowds attending the theatre began to increase.<sup>34</sup> From 1853 onwards, plays in Indian languages like Marathi, Gujarati and Hindustani came to be performed at the Grant Road theatre.<sup>35</sup> Thus, vernacular theatres like the Gujarati, Parsi and Marathi Theatre soon arose that were successful in attracting and captivating the native audiences and became immensely popular till the second half of the 20th century.

The Hindu theatre seems to have been in existence since 1846.<sup>36</sup> The Khetwadi theatre, in Girgaum locality, was started in 1846. It was most probably an open-air theatre of a more rustic form, and it hosted plays that were translated from Sanskrit. This, in all probability, catered to a Marathi-speaking public as the Khetwadi area was, and still is, predominantly a Marathi neighborhood. Authoress Kathryn Hansen also writes regarding it that "Whatever the case, it is certain that before the rise of the Parsi theatre in 1853, the Hindu theatre was actively present in Bombay and in its popular dramas were performed in the local language. This trend must surely have given impetus to the Parsis."<sup>37</sup>

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29 Shirodkar. p. 605.

30 Gen. Dept., Vol. 15/ 1853. Folios 111-114.

31 Shirodkar. P. 611. Jagannath Shankarsheth himself chose and organized a group of Native actors to get trained by European theatre professionals.

32 Mehta. p. vi. In 1879, the Gaiety theatre was constructed, and English plays moved into a more 'respectable' location in the Fort area.

33 Mehta. p. 145. Location of the new theatre "heartily disliked" by the European residents due to its close proximity to the Mussalman Burying Ground and the Town Drain. Yet, it was the only one of its kind in Bombay; therefore, it was called the Royal Theatre.

34 Mehta. p. 125.

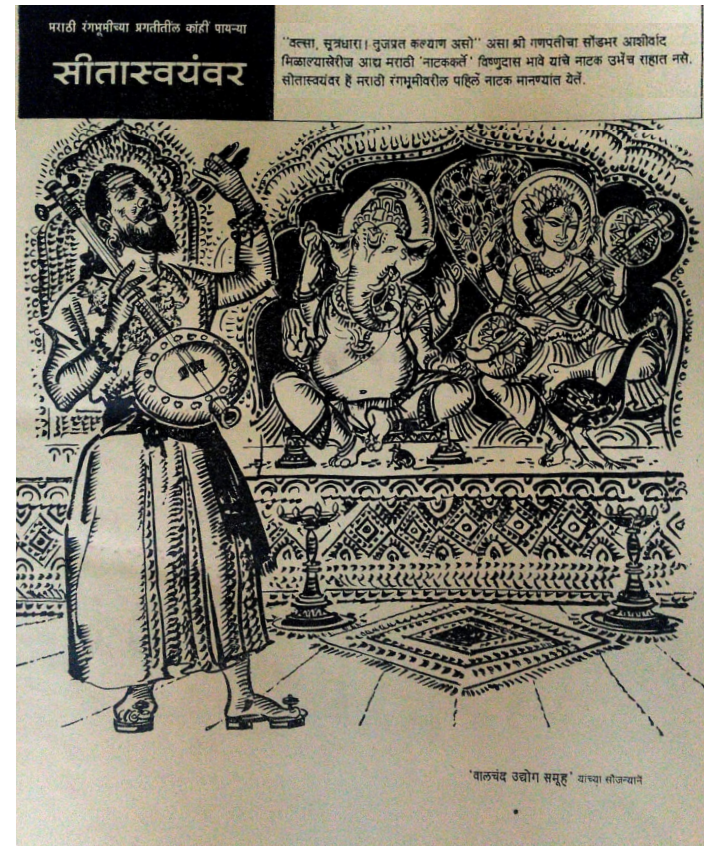
35 Gupt. p. 24.

36 Gupt. p. 199.

37 Gupt. p. 28. Supported by Mehta. p. 130. A few months later, the Parsi Theatrical Company commenced its activities.



In 1853, Vishnudas Bhave, the Father of Marathi Natak, came to Bombay along with his travelling dramatic troupe titled the Hindoo Dramatic Corps. They started by staging their plays in temporary shamianas or mandaps in the Girgaum locality in Mumbai. Bhave's plays were rooted in the classical and folk forms of theatre, which appealed to the local masses. Bhave is said to have also visited the Grant Road Theatre to view the English plays being held there. Inspired by the different and more structured format of the Western theatre, Bhave adapted Marathi Sangeet Natya to the proscenium stage and held the first performance of his play Sita Swayamvar at the Grant Road Theatre in 1853. Later Vishnudas Bhave continued to stage plays at the Grant Road theatre, which were quite well-received by the public. He was even asked to exhibit his plays in London, but he refused to travel on religious grounds.<sup>38</sup>



2.8 Facade of the Shri Vishnudas Bhave Auditorium, Vashi<sup>39</sup>

2.9 Portrait of Shri Vishnudas Bhave.<sup>40</sup>

2.10 Sita Svyamwar graphic from the jubilee volume souvenir. Courtesy: MMSS



<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See URL in Bibliography.

<sup>40</sup> See URL in Bibliography.



Besides travelling theatre companies, various theatre groups arose within Bombay, beginning with the amateur theatre groups organized by students.<sup>41</sup> These subsequently gave rise to professional theatre troupes within the city. A few months after the staging of Sita Swayamvar at the Grant Road Theatre, the Parsi Theatrical Company was established.<sup>42</sup> Kumudini Mehta, in her Ph.D thesis on the Bombay Theatre, states - "The Grant Road Theatre began to be engaged regularly by 'the Hindoo Dramatic Corps' and the Parsi Theatre Committee. Their successes served as an incentive to the formation of other troupes."<sup>43</sup>

The Parsi Theatrical Company was the first theatrical company to be established by the Parsis. It was founded by Pestanji Dhanji Master in 1853.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, a number of Parsi theatre companies came up, out of which prominent companies like the Victoria Theatrical Company, Elphinstone Theatrical Company and Zoroastrian Theatrical Company are credited with having established "drama on a firm foundation."<sup>45</sup> The Parsi theatre was almost entirely based on the format of the Western theatre, however the subject matter of their plays concentrated on Parsi mythology and culture.<sup>46</sup> As Hansen puts it - "The Parsi theatre was grounded in both the accomplishments as well as the deficiencies of the English stage in Bombay."<sup>47</sup> Due to the shortage of theatres in Bombay, Parsi theatre companies travelled to various places in India to stage their plays.

An interesting mention can be made here of the Parsi Natak company called the 'Parsi Baronet Club' which was established by Nasharvanji Forbes in 1875. Before staging every play, a drop scene depicting the portrait of Sir Jamshethji Jeejeebhoy with the image of the J.J. Hospital would be displayed. Forbes then himself came onto the stage from behind the curtain and sang a song praising the philanthropic spirit of Jeejeebhoy. A part of the song's lyrics was the following - "This colorful curtain instructs you to achieve fame. He who achieves fame will never die." Thus, we can see an interesting and innovative use of the scenic curtain as a direct tool to entertain and educate the audience rather than only being used as a decorative element of stage property.<sup>48</sup>

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41 Mehta. p. v.

42 Mehta. p. 130.

43 Mehta. p.159.

44 Gupt. p. 26.

45 Gupt. p. 5.

46 Gupt. p. 20.

47 Ibid.

48 Gupt. p. 177



2.11 An attempt has been made to display what could possibly be the contents of the scenic curtain praising the philanthropic spirit of Jeejeebhoy<sup>49</sup>

Besides the Parsi theatre companies, there were also Hindi theatre companies that attained popularity in Bombay. The seeds of the Hindi theatre were sown by Ranchhodbhai Udayram whose play “Harishchandra” became so popular that it continued to be enacted for around ten years. Initially most of the Hindi theatre companies were owned by the Parsis. Their plays consisted of garish, loud scenes that aimed to arouse the audience at the sight of such a spectacle. Subjects such as marvelous palaces, flying angels, Krishna dancing on the hood of the serpent Kaliya in the Yamuna river, flying chariots or planes in the sky and demons from hell; all these were recreated and enacted before the audience with the use of innovative stage design and elaborate stage settings and costumes. The staging of such spectacular scenes was considered to be trade secrets among the Natak Companies. Indeed, it is even said that the stature of a theatre company in the eyes of the public was greatly influenced by the number of such dynamic scenes and scenic curtains that it displayed.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See URL in Bibliography.

<sup>50</sup> Dr. Adnyath. “Bharatiya Rang manch ka Vivechanatmak Itihas: Bangla, Marathi aur Gujarati Rangmanch ke Pariprekshya mein Hindi Rangmanch ka Adyatana Adhyayan.” Kanpur: Pustak Sansthan. 1978. Transliterated from p. 134. Henceforth to be referred to as BRVI.

With the advent of Dhahyabhai Dholaji Jhaveri, a new age began for Gujarati theatre where the ownership of the Gujarati theatre companies passed into the hands of Gujarati players from the earlier Parsi owners. This was also a time when the Gujarati theatre began to increasingly portray plays in Hindi and Urdu, moving out of Bombay and touring various places in North India.<sup>51</sup> These theatrical companies visited places such as Kolkata, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab.<sup>52</sup> Among some of the famous playwrights of the Hindi theatre were Dhahyabhai Dholaji Jhaveri, Chhotalal Rukhdev Sharma, Mulshankar Harishankar Mulani, Waghjibhai Asharam Ozha, Nathuram Sundarji Shukla and Phoolchand Master. Famous theatre companies included Mumbai Gujarati Natak Mandali, Morvi Aryasubhod Natak Mandali, Vankaner Aryahitvardhak Natak Mandali and Deshi Natak Samaj among others.

Post 1860, urbanized Bombay came to be established as an industrial and commercial city. Improved means of transport and communication meant the faster spread of ideas and influences among the masses. In this scenario, the taste of the increasingly urban populace became more refined. Earlier, this was evident right since the beginning of the Grant Road Theatre, where sub-par theatre activities were criticized in the newspapers of the times by reviewers. Likewise, the theatrical fraternity at the time had to adapt to the refined expectations of the audience.<sup>53</sup>

The influence of the Western theatre could also be seen in the commercial management in Bombay. The printing and selling of tickets, distribution of pamphlets with the synopsis of the play, the employment of publicity media outfits for promotion of plays and the popularity of farces across the milieu of theatre-goers, whether Parsi, Hindu or Gujarati are all vestiges of the Western theatrical influences. It is said the new theatre companies even lowered the rates of the tickets for the sake of the audience.

From such practices, we can see that the commercialization of the business aspect of the Theatre was consolidated during these times, to meet the growing demands and expectations of the audience who patronized the Theatre. This is also indicative of a certain formalization of the staging aspect with the use of the proscenium stage, where invariably, set and stage design was given greater attention to provide a more finished result. Further on, we attempt to explain why the techniques associated in executing the same were refined to great extents during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Thus, the establishment of the Grant Road theatre was an epoch in the development of theatrical practices, not only of significance for Bombay. This led to the formation of the area around the Grant Road Theatre as the new hub for theatrical culture. The act of Jagannath Shankarsheth for the promotion of theatre was a gesture in good faith. By greatly aiding the establishment of the Grant Road theatre, his act was one of extreme significance that made possible the construction of the new theatre for the Natives.

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<sup>51</sup> BRVI. Transliterated from p. 211.

<sup>52</sup> BRVI. Transliterated from p. 134.

<sup>53</sup> Mehta. p. 131.





2.12 The Parsees are beholden to the Hindus for their knowledge of the dramatic art. Fifty years ago, a well known Marathi company gave a series of performances before delighted audiences under the auspices of the late Dr Bhau Dajee. Courtesy- The Cities Within - Dwivedi Sharda, Mehrohtra Rahul.

When the Western theatre was just beginning to attract the attention of the Indian public, Shankarsheth saw it as a means to expose his fellow countrymen to the intellectual values of the West and learn from them. He saw the potential sphere of influence of the medium which could extend right up to the national level. It eventually attracted the Indian populace, which led to the establishment of theatre companies by Indians. Theatre companies from Bombay also travelled to other places within and outside India to stage their performances.<sup>54</sup> With such activities, immense support was provided to the Indian theatre and it was also crucial to the further development and sustenance of the Marathi Sangeet Natak.



2.13 Ramshastri (1944) Courtesy: FTII



2.14 Potrait of Jagannath Shankarsheth<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Gupt. p. 116 - 119, 121, 126, 129, 130 - 131, 142, 146, 159.

<sup>55</sup> See URL in Bibliography.





2.15 Depicting a rural street scene, this backdrop is from the Manoranjan Collection of Pune.

Having thus observed the arrival of the various Indian theatrical companies and their existence alongwith colonial drama companies, we next elaborate on our findings of the Marathi Sangeet Natya and the Marathi Theatre. From the times of the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur to the initial sparks set in motion by Vishnudas Bhawe to the ignition manoeuvres of Kirloskar's pioneering efforts, all are silhouetted amidst Marathi Sangeet Natya and Marathi Theatre.



## CHAPTER 3 : MARATHI SANGEET NATYA AND THEATRE : THE GENESIS

The Marathi theatre encompasses a rich and varied theatrical tradition. A significant feature of the Marathi drama is to depict the daily strife in the life of the common man. It has been a medium of presentation of complex psychological and social phenomena pertaining to the common man's struggles and human interaction as well as a medium of education and spreading awareness. As is said by G. M. Watve, Secretary, Marathi Natya Parishad - "It is because of the stage that dramatic literature can claim the title of people's literature."<sup>1</sup> The roots of the Marathi theatre are to be found in the indigenous folk traditions of Maharashtra. Folk theatre forms like tamasha, gondhal and dashavatara among others were already prevalent since the 16th century in Maharashtra.<sup>2</sup> The influence of such folk traditions can also be seen in beginnings of Marathi Natya Sangeet. In fact, the evolution of the Marathi theatre has had a profound impact on the evolution of theatre in India.<sup>3</sup>

In the first phase from 1843 to 1880, the foundations of the Marathi Sangeet Natya were laid by Vishnudas Bhawe, who is regarded as the Father of Marathi Theatre and rightly so, as he produced the first Marathi Natak. In doing so, he brought about developments in Marathi theatre such as refining folk traditions and trying to formalize the Marathi theatrical arts, even before being himself exposed to Western influence. His dramas were the representations of mythological themes that became very popular with the secular audience. His plays went on for hours on end, while, keeping the audience enthralled till nightfall. This in itself speaks of his genius capabilities. The form he developed for the Marathi theatre led to the development of the full-fledged Marathi Sangeet Natya tradition later. Hence, the birth of an organized professional Marathi Sangeet Natya is credited to Bhawe alone.<sup>4</sup> However, at this juncture, the reader is implored to look further back into history and observe the reigns of the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur.



3.1 The Maratha King Sarfoji II who ruled Thanjavur in the late 18th century. Caricatured outline by artist Michel Testard. Adapted from Indian Express Mumbai, Tue, 22 May 2018

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<sup>1</sup> Desai, Vasant S., K. Narayan Kale, Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni and Bapurao Naik, "The Marathi Theatre." 1st ed. Bombay: Popular Book Depot. 1961. p. v. Henceforth referred as The Marathi Theatre.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Kale, Narayan K. "Theatre in Maharashtra." New Delhi: Maharashtra Information Centre. 1967. p. a. Henceforth referred as Kale.

<sup>4</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 6.



3.2 Portrait of Maharaj Venkoji Raje of Thanjavur.<sup>8</sup>

Since ancient times, under the Chola kings, Thanjavur had been a seat of art and culture. Continuing this cultural tradition, during the years 1675 to 1855 were the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur.<sup>5</sup> Venkoji or Akoji Raje, the brother of Shivaji Maharaj and his heirs at their court had experts from a variety of fields ranging from politics to art and literature. During his time, the development of drama and the theatre arts continued to take place. This branch of the Maratha kings were profound visionaries for Marathi drama besides being accomplished playwrights themselves. For example, Shahraj Raje, Venkoji Raje's eldest son, wrote 19 plays in Marathi, 25 in Telugu, 4 in Sanskrit, 2 in Hindi, and 1 amalgamated in 5 languages.<sup>5a</sup> Such has been the literary versatility of the written dramas.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in the modern era, the Maratha kings of Thanjavur so far have to be heralded as the foremost pioneer of the Marathi theatre in the 18th century.

In essence, the very basis of Thanjavur drama's lack of research was a drawback. Linguistic, political, cultural factors along with the lacunae in researches were the core reasons why this tradition never established itself in Maharashtra. The Thanjavuri dramas were mainly produced as a court entertainment and only staged before the royalty. It was not in particular promulgated among the common public. Thus, while on one hand, the Thanjavuri dramas were not amalgamated into the mainstream of Marathi dramas, on the other hand the scattered folk theatre forms existed. In such times, the depiction of Vishnudas Bhave's Sita Swayamvar initiated a unique tradition thereby advocating the Marathi Sangeet Natak.<sup>7</sup>

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5,5a Marathi Vishwakosh. Vol. 12. p. 1223 - 1224. The 19 plays written by the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur are as follows - Ganesh Jayanti, Saraswati, Parvati, Sita Kalyan, Patta Abhishek, Shachi Purandar, Veli Kalyan, Krishnaleela, Jal kreeda, Sati Pati Kalyan, Shanta Kalyan, Shankar Narayan, Mrityunjayachiranjeev, Hariharvilas, Laxminarayankalyan, Govardhanodwaran, Gangakaverisanwadh, Samudra Kalyan (Subhadra Parinay), Laxmibhudevisanwad, Panchamatavilasat.

6 Transliterated from the Marathi Vishwakosh. Vol. 12. p. 1,223.

7 Transliterated from Marathi Vishwakosh. Vol. 12. p. 1,224.

8 See URL in Bibliography.



As mentioned earlier, Vishnudas Bhave (1818 - 1901) is considered to be the founding Father of Marathi Natya. In 1842, a Bhagwat troupe from Karnataka staged their performance in the Ganesh temple at Sangli.<sup>9</sup> Employed in the Court of Raja Chintamanrao Patwardhan of Sangli since an early age, Bhave staged Sita Swayamvar, the first Sangeet Natak, in the Court of the latter's palace in 1843.<sup>10</sup> This play is considered to be the first Marathi Sangeet play to be staged. Drawing heavily from the folk tradition of the Bhagwat troupe from Karnataka, Bhave while realigning the format yet retained the influence which made it different from the traditional Bhagwat format.



3.3 Sketch depicting Sita Swayamvar. Artist V. V. Divkar.

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<sup>9</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 3.

Bhave's play had ample scope for singing and dancing; moreover, not all the dialogues were written, some were spontaneously delivered by the actors conducting their character, during the play. He employed the use of the Sutradhar and a musical chorus, who while being present for the entire duration of the play, were in charge of singing the songs. The Sutradhar, it is said, would typically stand in the corner to the right of the actors in front of the back curtain. The actors would use masks, which Bhave himself fashioned out of papeier mache. The Sutradhar would direct the actors on stage. The performance was initiated with a prayer song dedicated to the deities of Ganpati and Saraswati, and the first person to enter would be the Court Jester or the Vidushak. At the end of the performance, an 'Aratee' would be circulated in public. All these features are the result of the influence of classical Sanskrit drama and folk theatre. The stage setting employed by Bhave for the first performance of this play was relatively simple.<sup>11</sup> The play was staged in the Court of Sangli, and the stage setting consisted of a piece of red cloth that was hung as the background along with a few wooden props employed by the actors. The space was lit by Ditmar hanging lamps.<sup>12</sup>

After the successful performance of the plays, Bhave formulated a theatre troupe. As the death of the Raja of Sangli resulted in the loss of patronage, he thus began to travel and stage plays in locations all over Maharashtra with his dramatic troupe. The reality in effect was different. The successor to the Raja of Sangli was a royal minor and was in every which way expressing his inability to live up to the promise of his ancestor, i.e., to the release of land to Bhave and his troop members. Bhave's plays were based on episodes from the Ramayana, generally known as the Ramavatory Khel. While at Sangli, the troupe performed at the palace Court of Sangli. Once they began to travel, performances were held either in large open spaces or temporarily erected pavilions.<sup>13</sup> Other touring theatre companies subsequently came up.<sup>14</sup> Prominent among these were the Ichalkaranjekar Natak Mandali, Kolhapurkar Mandali, Puneekar Mandali and Altekar Mandali. Kirloskar Mandali was the theatre company that produced Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe, written by Vinayak Janardhan Keertane. This was the first Marathi play that had a written script.<sup>15</sup>

Bhave composed the play Raja Gopichand to be staged in Bombay in 1853.<sup>16</sup> The staging of this performance marked the beginning of a change in the history of the Marathi theatre. Bhave staged a play for the increasingly urban population in an emerging metropolis like Mumbai. The audience consisted of not only Marathi-speaking people, but also members from other communities such as Parsis, Gujaratis, Christians, Muslims and even Europeans. After arriving in Bombay, Bhave had the opportunity to witness Parsi Natak and Western operas as well. Bhave was also much in awe of the production techniques and stage aids of the Grant Road theatre, which included changeable scenery.<sup>17</sup> This shows that innovations in scenery were constantly followed and implemented in Bombay.

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11 The Marathi Theatre. p. 4.

12 Allana. p. 16. Referred again on pg. 88, foot-note 5

13 The Marathi Theatre. p. 4.

14 The Marathi Theatre. p. 7. "By the year 1960, as many as 12 touring companies were active in Maharashtra."

15 The Marathi Theatre. p. 7.

16 The Marathi Theatre. p. 5.

17 Ibid.



The result was the mixing of the existing nomadic theatre of Maharashtra with influences from the Parsi and Western theatre. Further it led to the adaptation of the play format with the proscenium stage, which had already existed in Bombay at that time. Thus, the Marathi theatre, too, was being influenced by these Western theatrical traditions.

The second phase in the development of the Marathi theatre which lasted from 1880 to 1920 was known as the Classical period of Marathi drama. Numerous Marathi theatre companies came into existence during this period, while a number of prominent playwrights also emerged. From 1880 to 1885, a wave of Renaissance spread through Maharashtra and English literature spread its influence amidst the learned in the Marathi-speaking community. The educated masses began to find those plays based on the classical Sanskrit tradition as quite crude and sought for more refined dramatic entertainment. Thus, though classical plays continued to be performed, now English plays especially those of Shakespeare were translated and performed. Authors and litterateurs were attracted to the translation into Marathi of dramas written in English and Sanskrit. Notable examples include the translations of Othello by Kolhatkar in 1857, Merchant of Venice by A. V. Patkar in 1871 and Julius Caesar by K. G. Natu in 1872.

Marathi Natak companies were of two types, firstly the travelling companies that would tour all over Maharashtra to exhibit their works and secondly, others who chose to perform in one place.<sup>18</sup> The best features of both classical Sanskrit and English plays were identified and crystallized in the form of the Marathi dramas. Along with the Grant Road Theatre in Bombay, other theatres came up like the Poornanand and Anandodbhava Theatres in Pune. With the establishment of theatres, there was growth in the theatre business and hence, the creation of scenic backdrops received an impetus. In the realm of Marathi theatre, the drop curtain was being used from 1865 onwards. Further, painted sceneries began to be displayed from 1873 onwards.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> BRVI. p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 9.

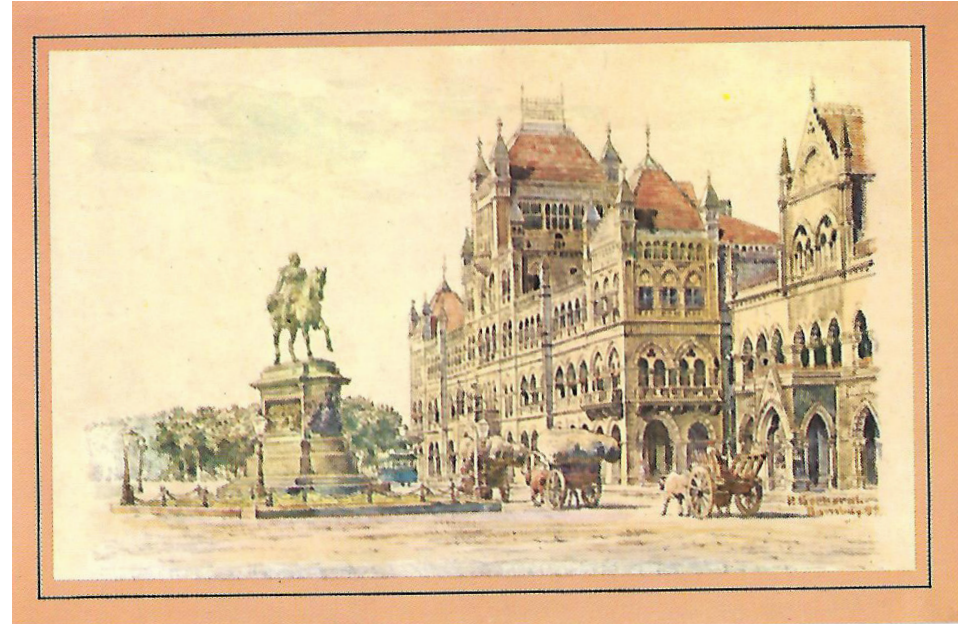


3.4 Hamlet graphic from the jubilee volume souvenir.  
Courtesy MMSS

In Bombay, an attempt was even made by The Elphinstone Society that staged the English version of the Sanskrit play Shakuntala in Elphinstone College in 1867.<sup>20</sup> These came to be known as “Bookish Plays” in the realm of Marathi theatre and were more library-oriented. Though “the better translators took care to adapt the original to the exigencies of our own country and culture,”<sup>21</sup> only a few of such plays could be staged. As such, the genre did not get completely synthesized into the mainstream flow of staged performances. Moreover, it soon became apparent that the people liked music. It is during this period that Marathi Sangeet Natak first came up and became very popular.

Subsequent to this, the Marathi theatre continued to be adapted to the proscenium stage and the urban audience. The business of the theatre grew, from ticketed sales to more elaborate set design and staging. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the Marathi Sangeet Natak was first developed. Plays like Nala Damyanti (1879) and Harishchandra (1880) were produced by Sokar Bapuji Trilokekar. This marked a period of major change as the Sutradhar as employed by Bhave in his plays was abandoned in favor of the actors essaying their own roles and singing parts.<sup>22</sup> It is stated that - “The actors of the Sangeet Natak stage contribute in no small measure to the success of the play.”<sup>23</sup>

Theatre companies like the Aryodwarak Natak Mandali and Ichalkaranjekar Natak Mandali were established, the former by Govind Ballal Deval and the later by Shankar Atmaram Patkar in 1879 in Pune. Ichalkaranjekar Natak Mandali staged Mahadev Shastri Kolhatkar’s Othello and Vishnu Moreshwar Mahajani’s Tara and Ramchandra Pradhan’s Bhrantikrut Chamatkar in 1867.



3.5 View of Elphinstone college from a painting of the 1900s where an attempt to stage the english version of the sanskrit play Shakuntala was made. Postcard also shows 'Kala Ghoda'. Vakil's postcards, courtesy: Dr. Amol Divkar.

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<sup>20</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Nadkarni, Dnyaneshwar. “New Directions in the Marathi Theatre.” New Delhi: Maharashtra Information Centre, 1967. p. 11. Henceforth referred to as Dnyaneshwar.

<sup>22</sup> BRVI. p. 202.

<sup>23</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 15.



Balwant Pandurang Annasaheb Kirloskar is considered to be the pioneer of Marathi Sangeet Natak.<sup>24</sup> He himself was an accomplished actor, singer and playwright. The first Sangeet Natak was Annasaheb Kirloskar's musical Shakuntala produced in 1880. Its first performance took place at Anandodbhava theatre in Pune on October 31, 1880.<sup>25</sup> This was based, as mentioned earlier, on the classical work, Abhijnanashakuntalam by Kalidasa. In order to further organize and refine the dramatic structure and create a well-made play format, he veered away from the Dashavatari pattern followed by Bhawe and also replaced the traditional shlokas with suitable songs. Bhawe's plays were more like a collection of events portrayed together without an apparent connecting flow.<sup>26</sup> It was more like a combination of prose and music; hence it is appropriate to call it a musical in the true sense. The tunes were influenced by not only the indigenous music of Maharashtra and Karnataka but also the ragas and talas of Hindustani and Carnatic music.<sup>27</sup>

To quote from the book 'Bharatiya Rangmanch ka Vivechanatmak Itihas' on Kirloskar, it says - "Sangeet Natak is the result of the various experimentations of Kirloskar, all of the resultant specialties of which can be found in the Sangeet Natya play Sangeet Saubhadra. He incorporated and amalgamated influences from Bhawe as well as the Marathi farcical plays and English prose plays in equal measure in Sangeet Natak.<sup>28</sup> Like Bhawe, he based his plays on classical subjects. He used the Sutradhar and the Vidushak or Court Jester in his plays, an influence of both the Sanskrit and English dramatic tradition. Through orderly structure and connectedness in the play-story composition, his plays were well-made, which can be seen in the play Sangeet Saubhadra. Though like Bhawe's plays, it is based on a classical Sanskrit subject, it is well-connected and the story-line flows together seamlessly throughout the entire play. Despite the presence of stalwart mythical characters like Krishna, Ghatotkach, Narad and Balaram, the humaneness and liveliness of the relationship between the characters of Shubhadra, Balaram and Krishna has been succinctly portrayed through crisp, beautiful and melodious dialogue."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Allana. p.12.

<sup>25</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> BRVI. p. 202.

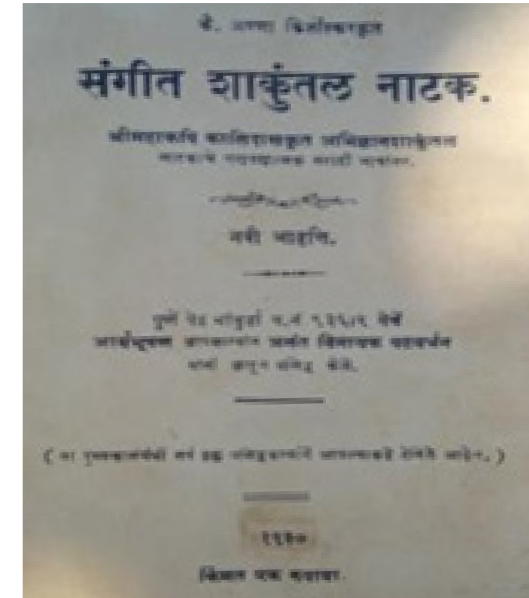
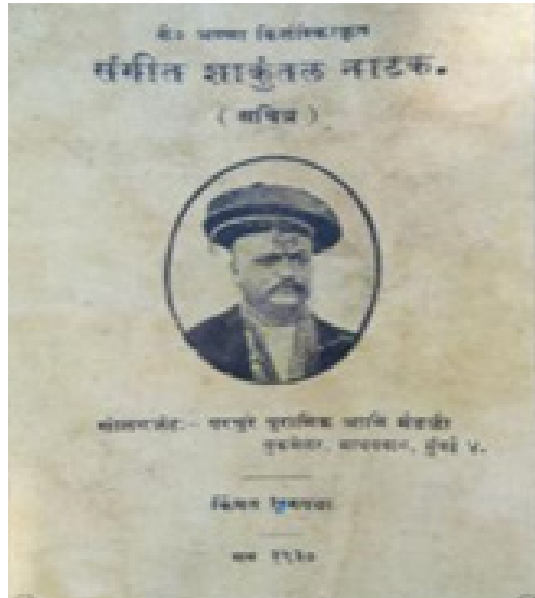
<sup>27</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 13. Supported by BRVI. p. 203 - 204. "In essence, songs, in particular with ragas, became a specialist part of Marathi Sangeet Natya. Tunes from Marathi, Kannada and also Hindustani bhajans were adapted into the Sangeet Natak."

<sup>28</sup> BRVI. p. 203.

<sup>29</sup> Transliterated from BRVI. p. 202.



3.6 Shakuntala graphic from the jubilee volume souvenir. Courtesy MMSS



3.7 Musical connotation for the first Marathi Sangeet Natak: Shakuntal. In the centre, Portrait of Balwant Pandurang Annasaheb Kirloskar.<sup>30</sup>

The Kirloskar Natak Mandali gained immense popularity, by producing and staging plays like Saubhadra, Manapman and Ram Rajya Viyog.<sup>31</sup> In 1886, it produced the play Mrichhakatika directed by Deval which became very popular.<sup>32</sup> In 1896, the Kirloskar Natak Mandali staged 'Veeratanaya' produced by Kolhatkar. Kolhatkar brought further changes in the Sangeet Natak format by completely discarding the Nati-Sutradhar concept and introducing more refined singing. The period between 1901 and 1910 is regarded as Kolhatkar's era in Sangeet Natak. He wrote plays like Guptamanjusha, Mookanayak, Mativikar and Premshodhan for the Marathi Sangeet Natak stage. During his time, the people of Maharashtra were recovering from the aftermaths of a famine and the arrest of Balgangadhar Tilak by the British Government. At this time, his plays are credited with having contributed towards uplifting the mood of the public and providing them with motivation and hope.<sup>33</sup> Yet, in essence, Kolhatkar's period was an age of Sangeet Natak for the Marathi theatre.<sup>34</sup>

30 See URL in Bibliography.

31 Allana. p. 26, 27. Supported by the Marathi Theatre. p. 14.

32 The Marathi Theatre. p. 16.

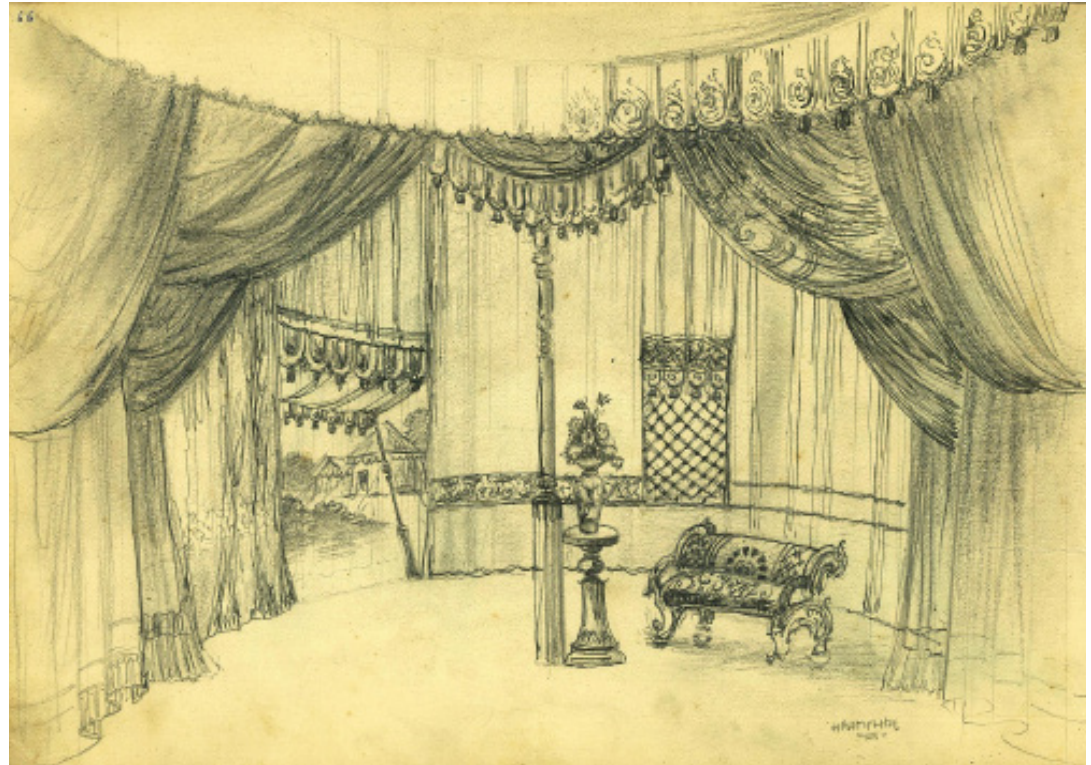
33 BRVI. p 5.

34 BRVI. p. 210.



The play *Manapman* by Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar was produced by Kirloskar Natak Mandali in 1911. It was performed by prominent actors of the time, like Balgandharva, Joglekar and Ganpatrao Bodas, who were well-suited for their respective roles. This performance marked a distinct departure from the earlier Sangeet drama, both in terms of dialogues and songs. The music was further refined and was entirely based on the best khayals and thumris of Hindustani classical music, and also certain selected tunes from the Carnatic schools. Parsi and Gujarati influences on music were completely discarded. The tunes were chosen with great care to ensure that they still worked with the natural tenor of the dialogue. The selection of the tunes was done by a celebrated musician of the time, Govind Sadashiv Tembe.

With *Manapman*, began the age of Sangeet Natak with the rendition of classical music.<sup>35</sup> The Kirloskar Natak Mandali then produced *Vidyaharan*, the second Sangeet Natak by Khadilkar in 1913. This play spoke against the social evils of drinking.



3.8 Sketch I for *Manapman* by artist V. V. Divkar. Mention of '*Manapman*' in right hand corner of the sketch.

Actors during this period specialized in essaying the role of feminine characters.<sup>36</sup> In 1905, Balgandharva joined the Kirloskar Natak Mandali, who subsequently became one of the biggest stars of the Marathi Theatre. Besides him, Keshavrao Bhonsle, who joined the Swadeshi Hitchintak Company in 1902, was popular in essaying the role of Sharada.<sup>37</sup> The success of the Kirloskar Natak Mandali helped to further commercialize the business of theatre and gave impetus to the establishment of more Marathi Natak companies. In the Sangeet Natak format, even devotional plays were produced, such as *Sant Tukaram* by the Rajapurkar Company in 1911, and *Sant Sakhu* written by Hari Narayan Apte and produced by the Natyakala Pravartak Company in the same year.<sup>38</sup>

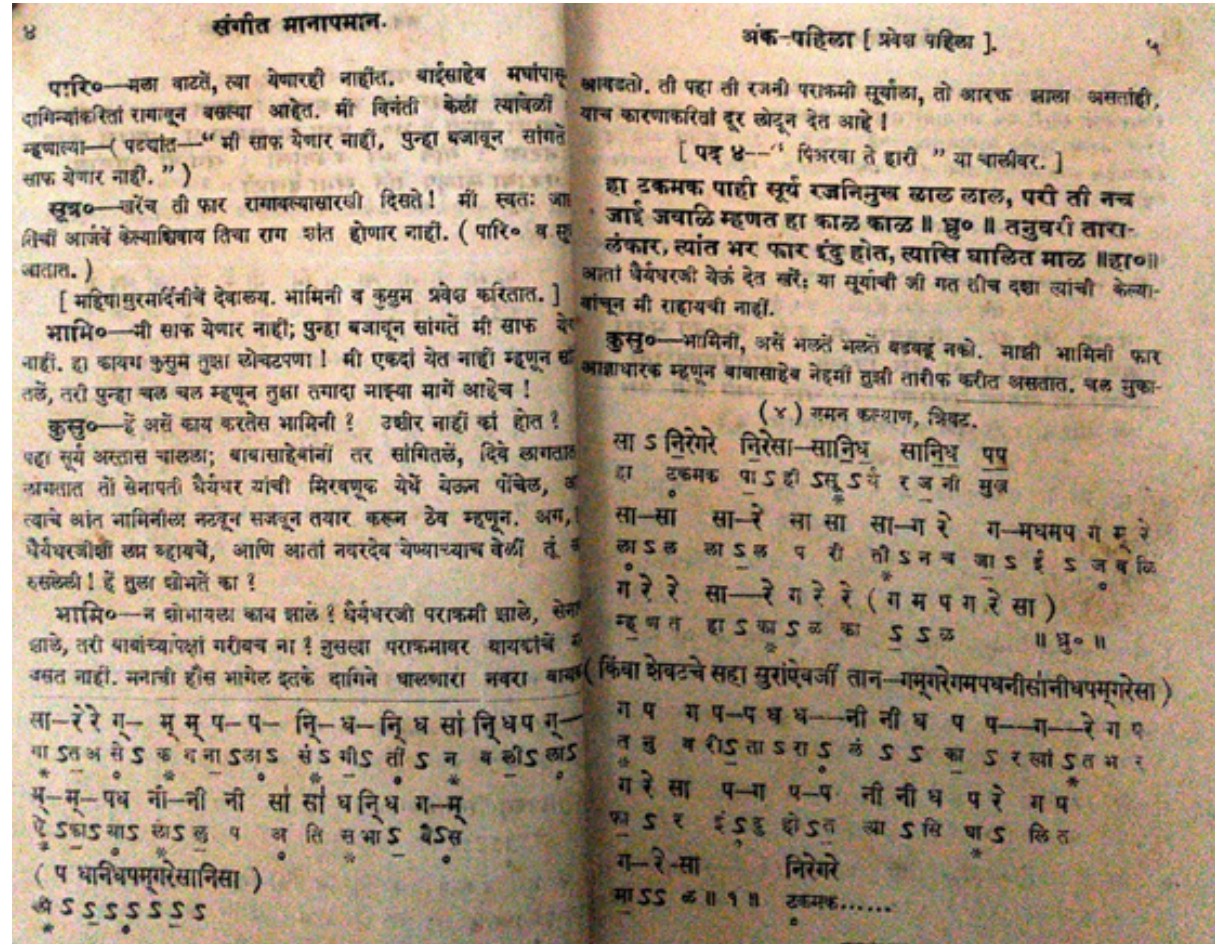
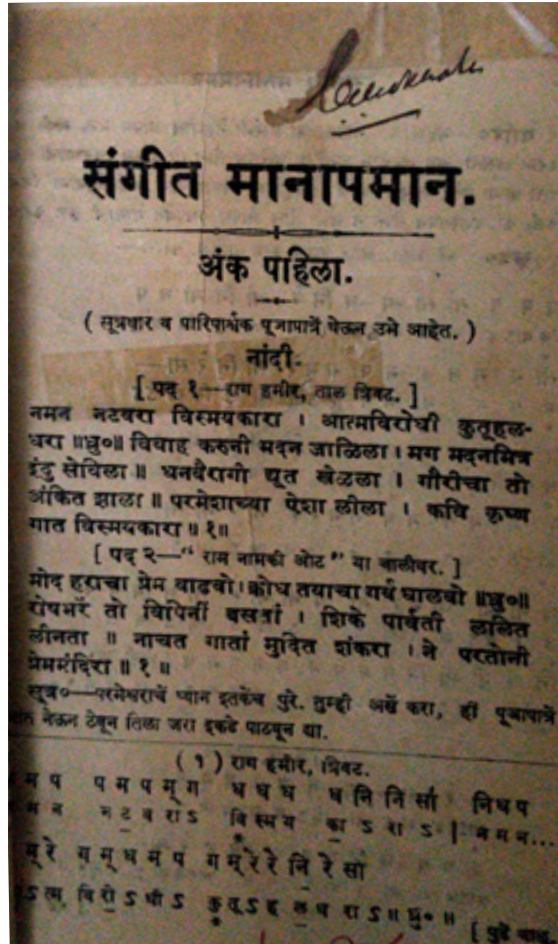
<sup>35</sup> BRVI. p. 207.

<sup>36</sup> BRVI. p. 143.

<sup>37</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 32.





3.9 A rare illustration of the script of Manapman, where musical notations have been provided for the actors. The music for the Sangeet Natak drew inspiration from classical music. The actors were to be proficient in acting and also be able to comprehend classical music: ragas and talas. Thus, the Sangeet Natak represented the embodiment of all forms of art, from acting to singing and even stage design and backdrop painting. Courtesy- MMSS.





3.10 From the sketchbook collection of Shri. V. V. Divkar a drawing proposal for the Sangeet Natak Manapman. Sketch II. Mention of 'Manapman' in right hand corner of the sketch.

→ Net placement as indicated to reflect sun or moon.



Deval was a student of Kirloskar, having impressed him with his acting abilities. He was the drama teacher for the actors of Kirloskar's play *Ram Rajya Viyog* in 1884 and also took over the Kirloskar Natak Mandali after the death of Kirloskar. He mentored such illustrious actors as Balgandharva and Ganpatrao Bodas. He further developed the Sangeet Natya tradition by stressing on clear and crisp pronunciation and by trying to elevate the character by choosing actors that suited the character's condition, position, status and glory, thereby imparting a natural charm to the depiction of the character which was more grounded in reality and hence, more relatable.<sup>39</sup> Shahunagarwasi Natak Mandali also produced devotional plays based on the life of saints titled *Sant Tukaram* and *Sant Namdev* written by Vasudev Rangnath Shirlekar. As we shall see, these seeds of activity later on germinated in the 20th century to promote temporal films.



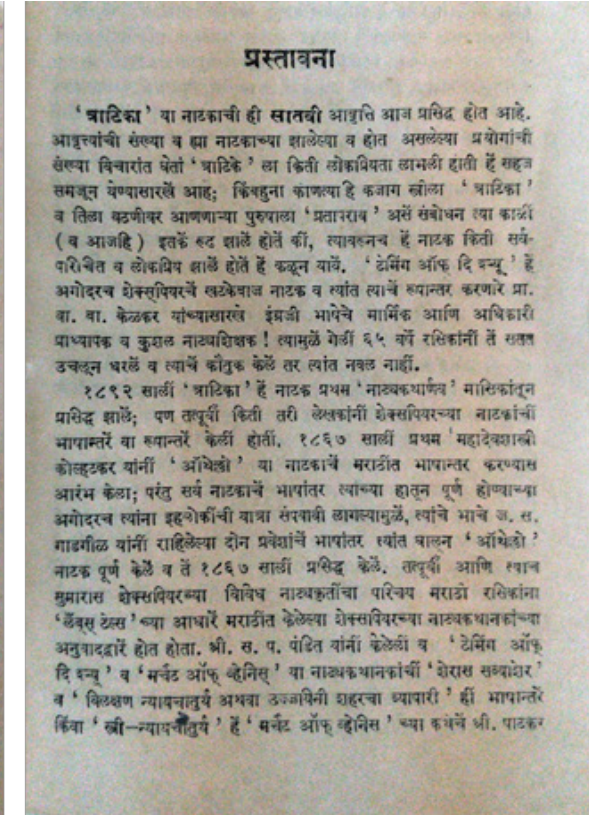
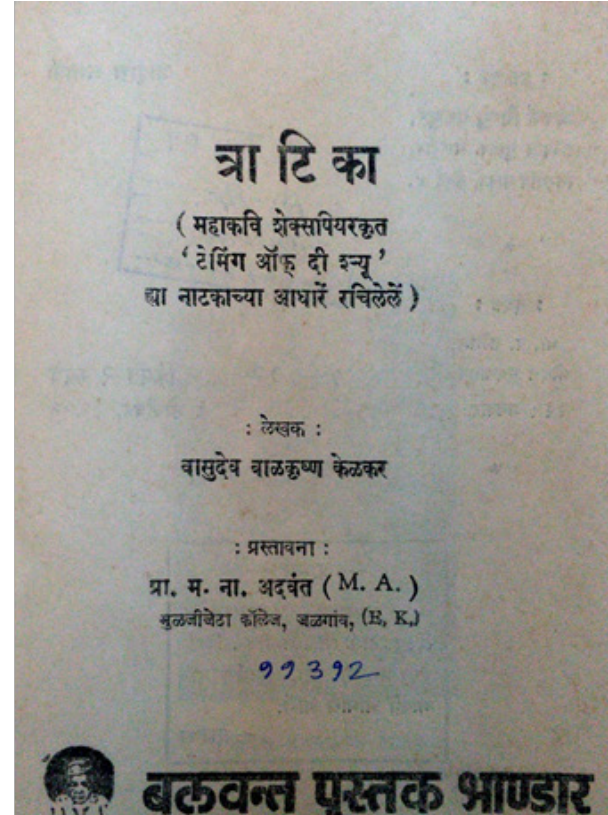
3.11 Performance of a modern-day version of the Sangeet Natak 'Rama Rajya Viyog.' The costumes and various stage setting properties including a painted scenic curtain and cut-outs are visible in the background. Courtesy - MMSS.

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<sup>39</sup> Transliterated from BRVI. p. 202.



However, along with Sangeet Natak, prose plays continued to be produced for the masses. One such company was the Shahunagarwasi Natak Mandali led by Ganpatrao Joshi, it was formed in 1881- 1882. It produced plays like *Tratika*, which was the adaptation of Shakespeare's play *Taming of the Shrew* by Prof. Vasudeo Kelkar of Ferguson College; and *Zunjarrao* by Deval which was the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*.<sup>40</sup> In 1899, *Sharada*, the first social play, was written by Deval. This play highlighted the social evil of a young girl being forced to marry an older, rich groom.



3.12 A rare illustration of the script of *Tratika*, a play adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* into Marathi. Along with Sangeet Natak, prose plays and 'Bookish' plays were also in vogue that helped further the development of the Marathi Theatre. The Marathi Theatre displayed a high level of organization and refinement in this period, culminating into an efficient and sustainable business. Courtesy- MMSS.

<sup>40</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 17.

Despite the development of the Marathi theatre at a phenomenal rate during this period, we still find that it was plagued by the lack of appropriate spaces to stage performances. Dedicated theatres existed only in Bombay and Pune. In other places, plays were staged in temporarily improvised theatres or old buildings, where kerosene lamps were still being used for lighting. Even the material used for make-up was of indigenous origin.<sup>41</sup>

In 1904, the Maharashtra Natak Mandali was established. It was founded by Trimbakrao Karkhanis, Govindrao Tipnis, Yashwantrao Tipnis, and Madhavrao Tipnis. This company staged performances of prose plays and was responsible for diverting attention from the Sangeet Natak towards the prose dramas. Most of its members were educated and it had the support of educated citizens as well. It staged the plays of Khadilkar, who was a close associate of Tilak at the time. Khadilkar's plays portrayed strong messages of heroic patriotism and were evidently influenced by Shakespeare's plays. One of the eminent actors of the Marathi stage, Ganpatrao Bhagwat, was associated with this Company. Khadilkar's first play Kanchangadh chi Mohana was produced by this Company in 1908. Earlier, in 1906, they had produced Khadilkar's Sawai Madhvraocha Mrityu as well.



3.13 Bust of playwright  
Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, Pune.

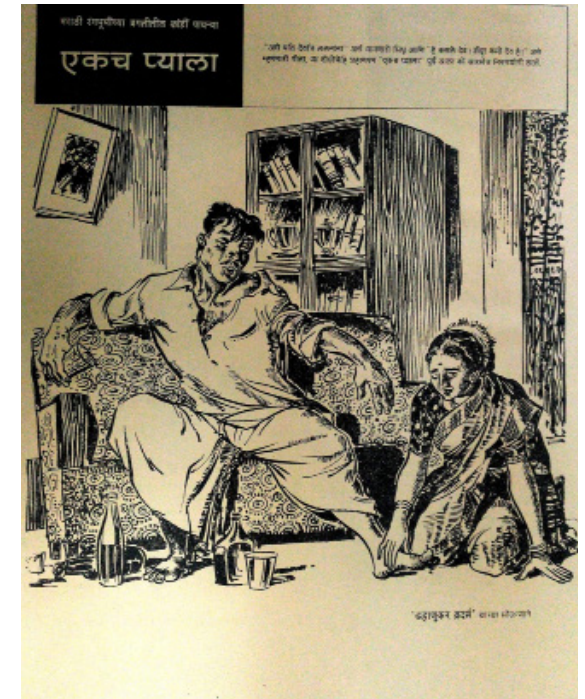
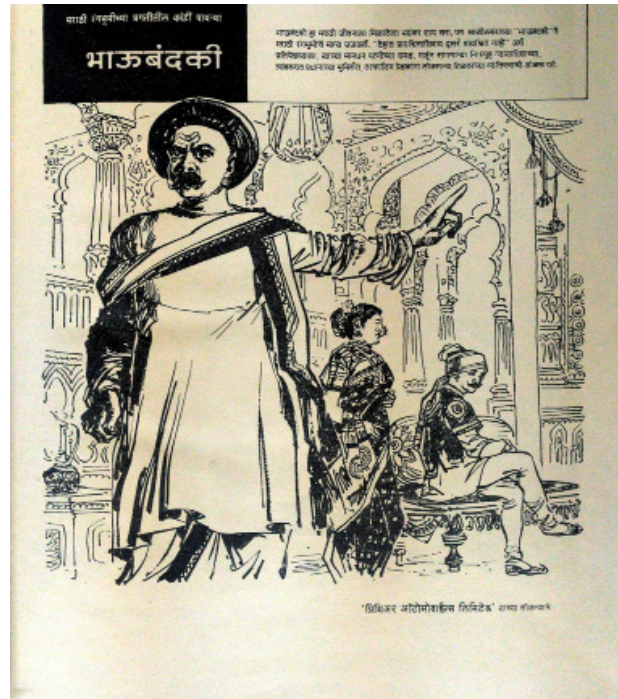
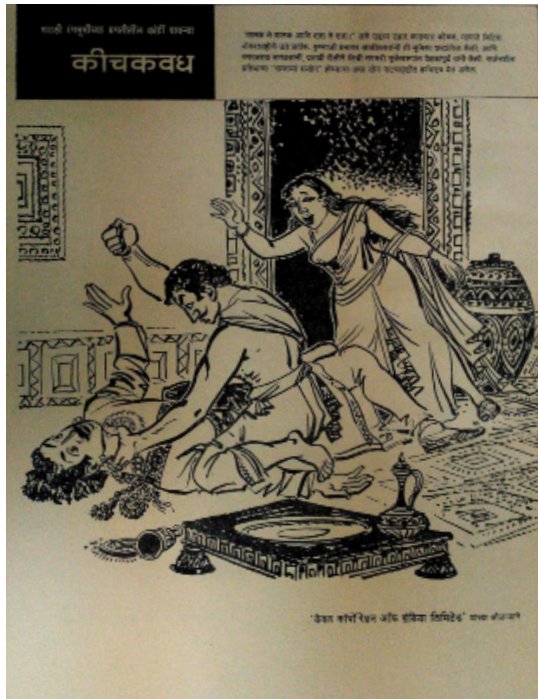


3.14 Postcard showing Hindamata mourning the loss of her son Tilak.  
Courtesy: V. V. Divkar collection

<sup>41</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 29. Dry white zinc, cream lemon, charcoal and cinnabar were the main ingredients for make-up.



The Mandali produced other famous plays like Keechaka Vadh in 1907 and Bhaubandaki in 1909. Their plays were often nearly banned by the British due to the nature of their politically-charged messages.<sup>42</sup> Besides, Khadilkar's plays, the Maharashtra Natak Mandali produced plays by Ram Ganesh Gadkari, described as "the most brilliant poet and dramatist in Marathi."<sup>43</sup> Gadkari was especially known for his powerful usage of the Marathi language, employed in the case of both tragedies and comedies. He was influenced by Khadilkar and Shakespearean dramas as well. His plays such as Premsanyasa were produced by the Company.<sup>44</sup> Some of his plays such as Ekach Pyala, a play against the evils of drinking, was produced by theatre companies posthumously after his premature death in 1919. Besides the Maharashtra Natak Mandali, Chittakarshak and Lokmanya were two more popular companies from the prose branch.



3.15 Keechaka Vadh 3.16 Bhaubandaki, 3.17 Ekach Pyala, graphic from the jubilee volume souvenir. Courtesy MMSS. See details on pg. 57

<sup>42</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

In 1908, the Lalitkaladarsha was established by Keshavrao Bhonsle, which produced plays by famous playwrights like Rakshasi Mahatwakansh by Waman Gopal Joshi in 1914, Haach Mulacha Baap by Mama Warerkar in 1918, and Sanyasacha Sansar again by Mama Warerkar in 1919. During 1920s and 1930s, it continued to enjoy immense popularity owing to its leading actors Keshavrao Bhonsle and Bapurao Pendharkar. Lalitkaladarsha closed down after the death of Pendharkar. It was revived again, in the late forties, by his son Bhalchandra Pendharkar. Swayamvar and Ekach Pyala were among the noteworthy plays produced by this company. Lalitkaladarsha thereafter continued to function well into the 1960s.<sup>45</sup>

The Gandharva Natak Mandali came into establishment in 1913. It was founded by Balgandharva, Bodas and Tembe, after leaving the Kirloskar Natak Mandali. This Company was patronized by the Maharaj Sayaji Rao Gaekwad of Baroda. The Gandharva Natak Mandali's first play Vidyaharan was staged on 3rd September, 1913 at Elphinstone Theatre. The acting prowess of stars like Balgandharva associated with this Company helped it achieve immense success with the masses. The play Swayamvar was written by Khadilkar in 1916, especially for Balgandharva. This play brought Balgandharva to the height of his popularity. After the performance of this play, the audience was much besotted with the music, so much so that the dramatic element of the Sangeet plays began to get ignored as a result. The plays became more like minor extensions of classical music concerts, with people from other communities also in attendance despite their inability to understand the niceties or the nuances of the Marathi language. Swayamvar is amongst the popular Sangeet Natak still being performed in Marathi theatres. Other prominent theatre companies of this period include the Natyakala Pravartak Company and the Rajapurkar Natak Mandali.<sup>46</sup>

There is an evocative description by litterateur Shanta Gokhale of the sets created for Bal Gandharva, the 'jewel in the crown of the Marathi theatre': "his setting had to be designed to offset every facet of his personality and performance: his movements, expressions, his music, his clothes. There was satin, velvet and gold aplenty, in his furnishings. Arches were constructed to frame him, steps for him to climb down in the full majesty of a trailing sari."

The Sangeet Natak tradition of this period initiated by the Kirloskar Natak Mandali were primarily directed towards the educated middle-class section of the society. But playwrights like Madhav Narayan Patankar created Sangeet Natak plays that became very popular among the general public. In order to attract this section of the society, Patankar wrote plays that were predominantly based on love stories and were often interspersed with vulgar jokes as well. He staged plays such as Vikramshashikala, Satyavijay, and Vasantchandrika. Among these, Vasantchandrika stands out due to the subject matter it handled, which was the life of prostitutes and the problem of prostitution in the society.<sup>47</sup>

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45 Allana. p. 38 - 40.

46 The Marathi Theatre. p. 24.

47 BRVI. p. 205.

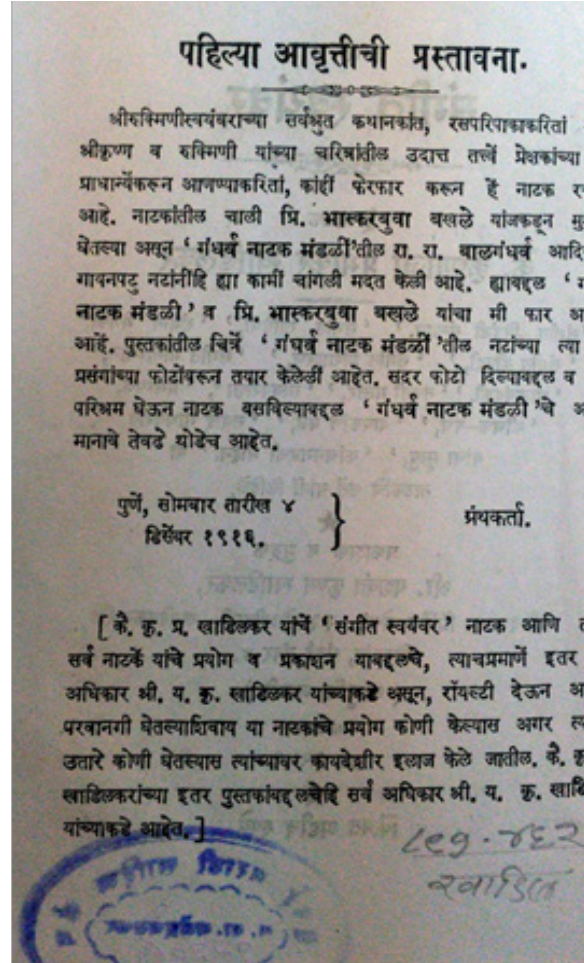




While at its peak, the Marathi theatre enchanted throngs of masses. It was a powerful medium that was used to promote anti-colonial messages to the audience. Therefore, Marathi drama and theatre were also promoted by Tilak and his followers, especially Khadilkar who was himself an eminent playwright. This is evident from one instance where rival stars like Keshavrao Bhonsle and Balgandharva came together and held a joint performance of the play Manapman at Baliwala theatre in Bombay on 8 July, 1921 to raise funds for the Tilak Swaraj Fund. This performance was an immense success, members of the audience having travelled from far off places like Pune, Nagpur, Baroda and Sholapur, along with people from all castes, creed and walks of life.<sup>48</sup>

3.18 Image showing a philatelic perspective of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. From a private collection.

<sup>48</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 40.



3.19 A rare book illustrating the script of the play ‘Sita Swayamvar’, showing the splendid Balgandharva on the cover of the book. This play was written by the eminent playwright Khadilkar specially to engage the acting prowess of Balgandharva. “The tradition of men playing women’s roles in plays is quite old. This practice was prevalent till the time of Shakespeare.

Even today, this practice can be observed in certain classical plays from the Asia region, like in the case of China’s ‘Peking Opera’ or ‘Noh’ and ‘Kabuki’ theatre from Japan. Kathak and Kathakali also employ male actor-dancers to play female roles.”<sup>49</sup>  
 Courtesy- MMSS.

49 BRVI. p. 143.



However, the Marathi plays of that time, with their intense subject matter which were a sharp critique on the existing evils then prevalent in the society, failed to arouse the interest of the audiences. But it is to be noted, even to this day, plays like Sharada, Sita Swayamvar and Saubhadra are staged for the masses; this goes to signify the ever-lasting appeal of the traditional Marathi Sangeet Natak rooted emphatically in both classical Sanskrit and folk traditions.



3.20 Performance of a modern-day version of the Sangeet Natak 'Saubhadra', a play written by Kirloskar based on the marriage of Krishna's sister, Subhadra with Arjuna. The plot was so dramatically arranged such as the minutest details of the human nature came forth so that the audience remained spell-bound. Kirloskar took a supernatural theme and made it completely relatable at a human level. In the background, is a scenic curtain by artist V.V. Divkar. Image courtesy - MMSS.



3.21 Performance of a modern-day version of the Sangeet Natak 'Swayamvar', a comedy dealing with the marriage of Krishna with Rukmini. Depicted above is one of the pivotal scenes of the plot, where much depended on the dramatic gestures of the actor unfurling the unusually large 'janma patrika' in front of the amazed actors. The action of unfurling required the actor to hold the patrika in a particular way that aided the stylized movement. In the background, is a scenic curtain. Painted curtains could be used for a number of scenes and different plays as per the stage setting by the theatre company. Courtesy - MMSS.



The third phase of development for the Marathi theatre, lasted from 1920 to 1955. Modern theatrical groups that came up continued to maintain its ties with past traditions. In 1942, the Natya Niketan was established by Motiram Gajanan Rangnekar. This is considered to be as the first professional theatre troupe of the modern era.<sup>51</sup> Rangnekar is a prominent Marathi playwright who is credited with having produced a number of plays, including Ashirwad. His plays, with their crisp dialogue formats and reflecting on the typical facets of the daily life of the middle-class Marathi-speaking people, were hard-hitting works that effectively communicated social and political messages.

Rangnekar's plays were precise depictions of the lives of the middle-class Maharashtrians. Bhatala Dili Osri was a satirical comedy produced by Rangnekar and was based on the lack of housing facilities in a growing metropolis like Bombay. This play, along with another play called Toh Mee Navhech, which was a reproduction by Rangnekar of the comedy written by the Marathi litterateur and playwright Atre, gained much popularity among the masses. Prominent playwrights of this period were Mama Warerkar and Atre. They concentrated on the contemporary situations of the time, "...the first with his reformist zeal and the second with his eye for human foibles and ludicrous episodes."<sup>52</sup>

Another company called Natya Manwantar, was established by a group of young idealists devoted to Ibsen and Shaw. They staged Vartak's Andhalyanchi Shala.<sup>53</sup> They departed from Sangeet Nataks in the way that they were written and staged as regular plays which communicated a core message, either political or social, and may not have had a business standing like the Sangeet Nataks.



3.22 Andhalyanchi Shala graphic from the jubilee volume souvenir. Courtesy MMSS. See details on pg. 57

<sup>51</sup> Dnyaneshwar. p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Dnyaneshwar, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Dnyaneshwar, p. 2.

Besides the staging and translation of plays, a number of periodicals were published in Marathi regarding the theatre and staging of dramas. Some of which were *Natyakatharnava*, *Natyamala*, *Natyakala*, and *Nataki*. The journal *Rangbhoomi* carried an article that described the staging of a performance by the Bandmann Company, including all details regarding production, and also compared it with the productions of the Indian companies.<sup>54</sup> Such exercises were surely of great help to the personnel involved in the staging of Marathi plays, providing information of existing practices different from their own that they could use as an inspiration to innovate and improve upon the existing practices in the realm of Marathi theatre.

These activities would have been especially relevant to the scenic painters, in whose works a distinct influence of the concepts of Western art can be discerned. Besides the drama companies, organizational bodies were established to promote Marathi theatre and drama culture. The Marathi Natya Parishad is the institution that was set up to represent the Marathi theatre.<sup>55</sup> Post its revival, the Parishad has become the voice of the Marathi theatre, both professional and non-professional.<sup>56</sup> Then there is the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha.

In 1943, hundred years after Vishnudas Bhave had staged his first play in the courtyard of Sangli's royal wada, the Marathi theatre celebrated its centenary. To honor the occasion, the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh organized a theatre festival under the direction of the late Dr. Amit Narayan Bhalerao. The festival is held annually at the Sangh, even to this day, where members of the Marathi theatre fraternity and those interested come together. "It was thus left to the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh to inaugurate a new era on the Marathi stage proper."<sup>57</sup>

"Encouraged by the example of the Sangh and its repertory of new plays, a number of other amateur organizations also began to assert themselves and the decisive stage came when the state drama festivals were started in 1953."<sup>58</sup> As per the information given by The Maharashtra State, "the success of this annual event had reached new heights and its finals do indeed represent the best in the amateur Marathi theatre."<sup>59</sup> The Sangha holds an annual competition of plays dedicated to honor the great Marathi actor, Chintamanrao Kolhatkar. Several amateur theatre groups from the Greater Bombay region continue to participate in it and showcase their talent.<sup>60</sup>

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54 Mehta. p. 247.

55 Dnyaneshwar. p. 9.

56 Ibid.

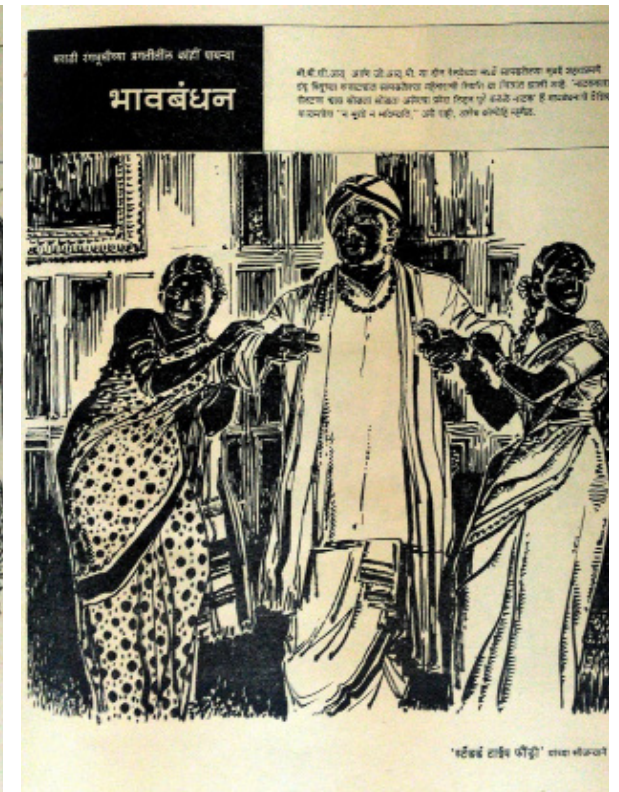
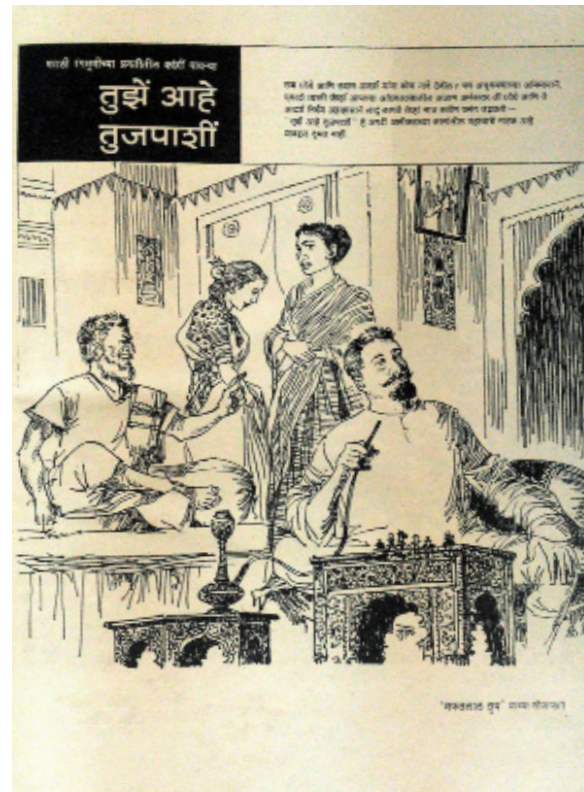
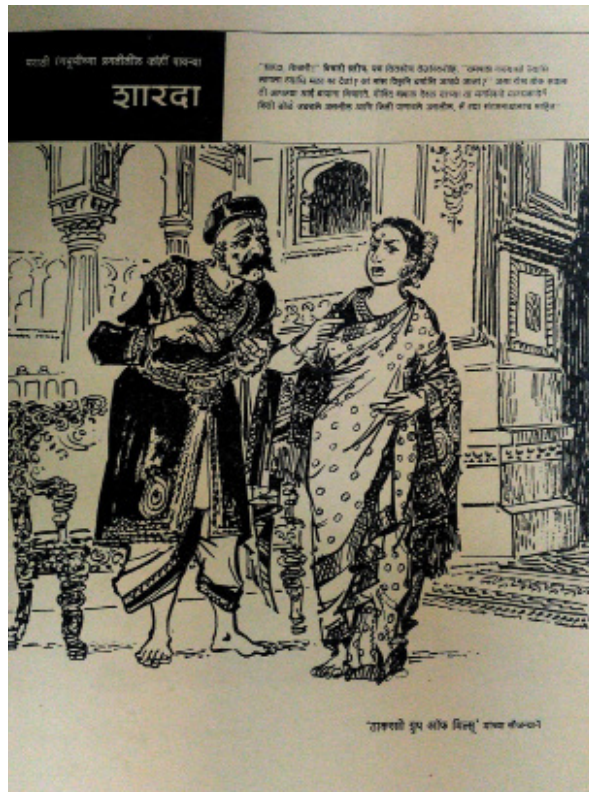
57 Dnyaneshwar. p. 5.

58 Dnyaneshwar. p. 6.

59 Ibid.

60 Dnyaneshwar. p. 9.





3.23 The artists imagery of famous Marathi Sangeet Nataks. These sponsored illustrations featured in “Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh - Sahitya Sangh Mandir Udghatan”, a publication brought out to commemorate the inauguration of the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangrahalaya in 1965. Such plays continue to remain a favorite among the masses. Other illustrations have been shown on earlier pages. Courtesy - MMSS.

The modern Marathi theatre consists of a range of plays including genres such as humor, farces, historical, musical and experimental dramas. It also includes plays by Vijay Tendulkar, P. L. Deshpande, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Satish Alekar, which are more serious dramas that occurred after 1970s. In fact, in the post-independence era, besides Bengali theatre, Marathi theatre has been a singular driving force behind innovations and significant dramaturgy in Indian theatre.<sup>61</sup>

61 Allana, p. 9.

Even in modern times, some playwrights continue to have adopted traditional folk theatre forms like the tamasha and the dashavatar into their plays, a theme that it has in common with its predecessor, the Marathi Sangeet Natak. Examples include plays such as Ghashiram Kotwal by Vijay Tendulkar, Marathi adaptations of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* as *Devajine Karuna Keli* (1972) and the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* as *Ajab Nyaya Vartulacha* (1974) by Vijaya Mehta, and the Marathi adaptation of Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera* titled *Teen Paishacha Tamasha* (1978) by P. L. Deshpande. What is notable is that the tamasha style was adapted and used as a narrative device in these plays. Thus, the past continued to provide innovative inspiration for the development of the theatre and continues to do so.

But with the introduction of the movies, the traditional theatre began to see a wane in its influence and subsequently went into decline.<sup>62</sup> The drama theatres began to be converted into cinema halls. Audiences began to patronize the new medium. Every major city in India hosted cinema halls by 1910.<sup>63</sup> With the decline in the format of the traditional theatre, it became difficult for the professional drama companies to sustain themselves, and in the process created hard times for scenic painters and their art.

However, theatre even in its decline, served as a great source of inspiration to the rise of the film industry. Players from the field of theatre moved into the film scenario, and chiefly drew on their associated experiences with the theatre to create films. The first movies were in fact renditions of stage plays photographed from the front stalls.<sup>64</sup> Playwrights from both the Marathi and Parsi theatres were roped in to write for film scripts. They viewed cinema “not as a new medium but merely as photographed theatre.”<sup>65</sup> Here, we can take into consideration the following statement by B D Garg - “The operatic structure of the Indian film is a hangover from the Parsi theatre - unique and uncinematic features (in a Western sense) of typical Indian film, notably the use of songs which have become an integral part of the cinema.”<sup>66</sup>

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62 Allana. p.11.

63 Garg, B.D. “So Many Cinemas. The Motion Picture in India.” Mumbai: Eminence Designs Pvt. Ltd., 1996. p. 15. Henceforth referred to as Garg.

64 Garg. p. 75.

65 Garg. p. 77.

66 Garg. p. 76.





3.24 Proposed drawing for the movie Jhansi Ki Rani by artist V. V. Divkar. These sketches reveal how scenic painters adapted to the changing environs of their art.

On social and political subjects, there existed a strong prepondency to align with the drama and drama personnel. Thus, in a historical sense, right from the 18th century till the middle of the 20th century, we find that from the initial stages itself, diligent efforts were made by litterateurs and interested personalities to write Marathi dramas pertaining to the social, political or economic matters and translation of plays, for the Marathi Sangeet Natak. Marathi Sangeet Natak was according to some historians and writers disbursed and embedded in the elements of the Parsi and Kutchi Natak tradition. However, at present as Dr. Allana states- "...there is an urgency to collect and collate sufficient material and execute documentation to throw further light on the subject."<sup>67</sup>

To note here, is the context which displays the condition of the Marathi theatre with its subsequent implications especially for the scenic painters. The need of theatrical backdrops led the scenic painters to adapt and develop techniques for such rendering that evolved to give Marathi Sangeet Natak an interesting outlook. With the rise of films, scenic painters like Baburao and Anandrao Painter, Vishnu Govind Damle, Sheikh Fattelal and V. V. Divkar among others began to delve into film scenics. With the decline of the theatre, they would have found it difficult to sustain themselves. Once again they were required to adapt and transfer their skills to the new medium. Thus, these developments in the field of theatre and later films, provide us with an understanding of the prevailing conditions of the scenic painters who honed and executed their craft, for the creation of the Backdrops.

So far, we have observed the birth of Marathi Theatrical Companies and their spread in 3 phases right from 1843-1955. The influences of Western plays on Indian psyche leading not only to just translations but culminating in adapting these plays according to Indian tastes and scenarios by the Marathi Literati. Attempts were even made by scenic painters to hone their skills to the changing environs due to the advent of the film industry. In the next chapter we shall peruse the theatrical backdrops and attempt to understand their outlook.

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<sup>67</sup> Allana. p. 9.





3.25 Drawing of a Palace design which can be utilized to depict in a Theatre as well as a Film. Courtesy V. V. Divkar sketchbook collection



## CHAPTER 4 : THEATRICAL BACKDROPS : A BRIEF OVERVIEW

**A**rt as a human expression of life holds true for drama as well. Drama helps to focus on and bring forth that which is ignored or highlights important social aspects including the psyche of women and men. Thus, it can be said that drama and life, in a sense, creatively contribute to each other. We have already charted the development of the Marathi Sangeet Natak and the consequent rise of the Natak companies. Expounding further, we now come to the scenic paintings created as background visuals for the Sangeet Natak and thus laid the foundations for artistic Theatrical Backdrops and the evolution of scenic artists.

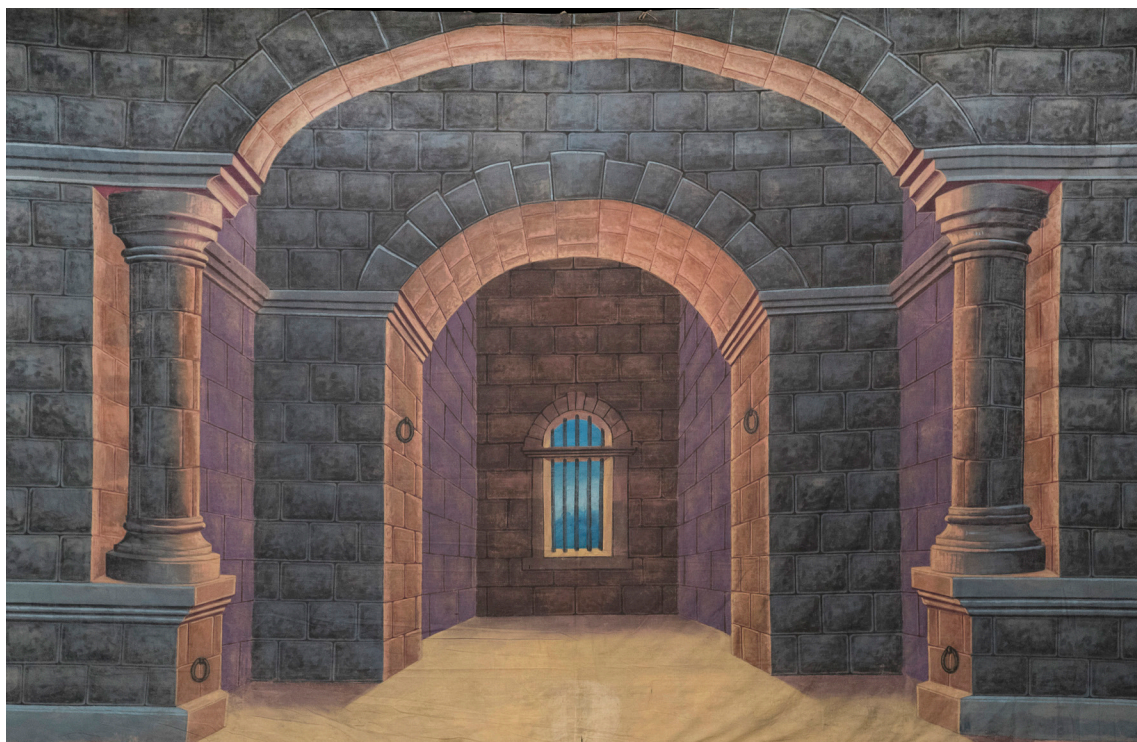
In the realm of the theatre, curtains became an indispensable part of the stage scenery. Most theatre companies kept an in-house stock of curtains that were used as backdrops for various dramas. The curtain was chosen according to the suitability of the artistic depiction of the curtain to the ongoing drama scene or play. With this theatrical art becoming a necessity, there arose a group of scenic artists that catered to the demand for backdrop curtains of the theatrical companies, especially from the period 1850 to 1950. Since the time of the Bombay Theatre, we get to hear of such scenic artists who painted backdrop curtains for the theatre. Baron Graham, William Wasencraft, Anandrao Mestry, Pestanji Madan, and the German painter Kraus are a few of the early famous scenic painters.



4.1 Scenic painting depicting Landscape from Kala Academy, Goa.



The art of Indian scenic painting especially developed in the 19th century. The common themes that Marathi Sangeet Natak dealt with were mythology, rural and social themes, historical and cultural dramas. As a result, the subjects depicted on the theatrical curtains of the time were landscapes, villages, street scenes either rural or urban, royal palaces and pavilions, forts, monuments, shamianas and military tents, jails, jungle and twilight scenes, living rooms with items of daily use. Shades of the day, morning, evening or night could be depicted on the curtains. Once made and sold by the artist to the theatre company, it became the sole property of the Drama Company and they retained the curtains after the play as a part of their stock of stage scenery. The curtains could also be used for other plays if they suited the nature of that drama. Hence, a variety of scenes were depicted on the curtains. The Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh still has retained their stock of painted curtains showing a number of scenes like “palaces, town squares, forests during the day and night, the insides of rural homes, and a view of cows grazing placidly.”<sup>1</sup> These curtains are described as follows - “Painted in vivid colors on 15 feet by 26 feet cotton sheets, the backdrops have been part of productions such as Jai Jai Gauri Shankar, Honaji Bala, Bebandshahi and Swayamvar.”<sup>2</sup>



4.2 Scenic painting for the drama Bebandshahi showing Fortress of a Jail. Courtesy- MMSS

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<sup>1</sup> Phadke Mithila “Restored backdrops get a gloss, bring old era back on stage.”. The Times of India. 13 August 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.





4.3 Scenic painting depicting surrounding view as seen from a Central Shamiana. Courtesy: Kala Academy, Goa.





4.4 A pencil sketch by the artist V. V. Divkar depicting premises of a Fort. Courtesy - Private Collection of Dr. Amol Divkar.



To put it far more emphatically, an excerpt from a newspaper article dated 13 August 2013 quotes the following about curtains- “Earlier this month, when audiences trooped in to see Honaji Bala at the MMSS, they witnessed an almost extinct theatre tradition. As the story of cattle herder and poet Honaji unfolded on stage, lavishly painted curtains served as the backdrop showing rustic homes and dense forests. “The public loved the backdrops,” recalled Shubhash Bhagwat, Secretary of the MMSS, “Most had seen them in plays while growing up and felt as though they were transported to that time.”<sup>3</sup>



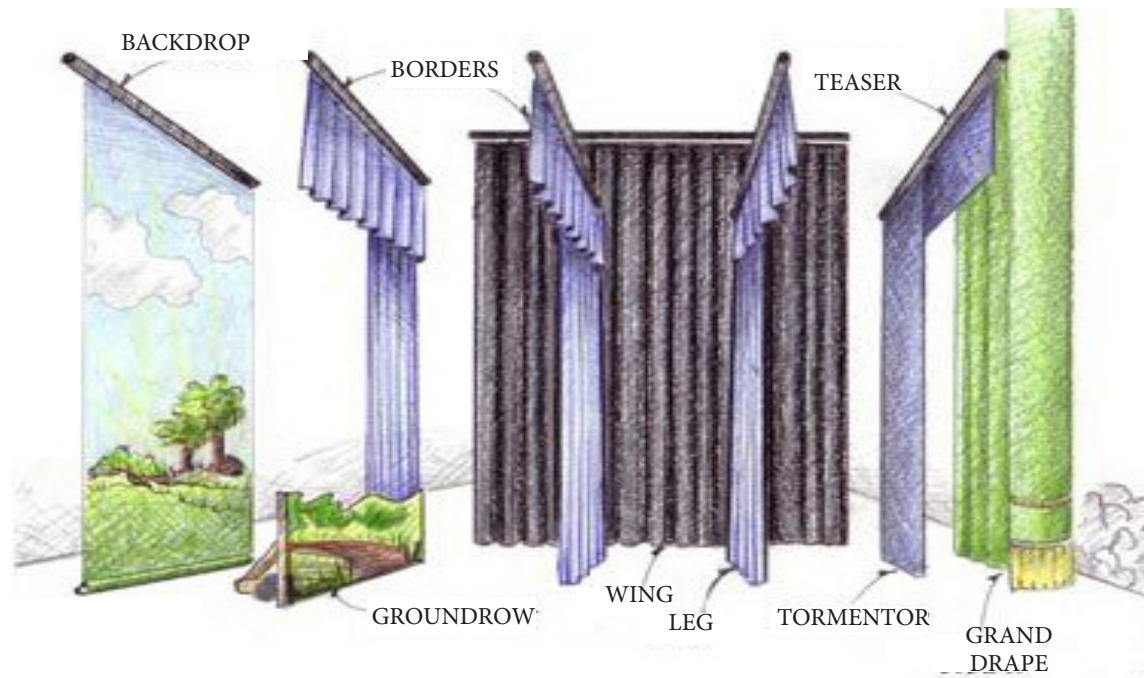
4.5 A scenic curtain titled Bala House - Saswad for 'Honaji Bala' Drama. Courtesy - MMSS.

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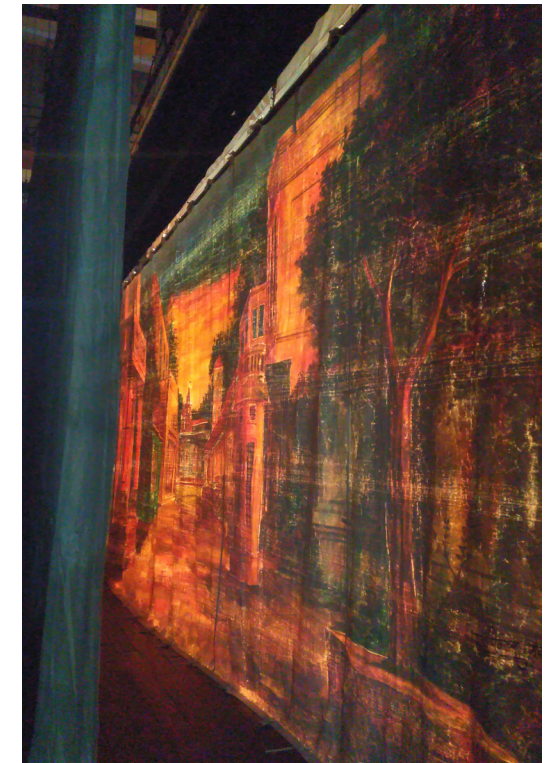
3 Phadke Mithila. “Restored Backdrops Get a Gloss, Bring Old Era Back on Stage.” Times of India. Dated 13 August 2013.



Earlier, we find that painters who created background sceneries for the theatre, were hired mainly from the Army. Specific mention of painters like Baron Graham and William Wasencraft is found who painted the scenery for the Bombay theatre around the year 1820.<sup>4</sup> The curtains have been described as “painted backcloths flapping upwards and downwards...”<sup>5</sup> Some curtains even find special mention in the newspapers of those times such as the one titled “The View of the Palinjarus and the Bombay Harbor” or another that depicted the destruction of the Armada. The former was displayed during a farewell performance intended as a tribute to Lord Elphinstone who was a great patron of the Theatre.<sup>6</sup> Being sourced from the English army, mention is made of one of the drop scenes of the Poona Theatre made by European painters.<sup>7</sup> These painters would have also been hired to retouch old curtains of the Bombay Theatre, to help with the “brightening up of the canvases.”<sup>8</sup>



4.6 Side view of the alignment of the curtains on a Proscenium stage.  
(right) Rear view of actual drama curtain from Balgandharva, Pune.



4 Mehta. p. 88.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Mehta. p. 88.

8 Ibid

Chronicles of those times mention that such scenic artists could not be hired on a permanent basis despite the intention to do so, due to shortage of funds.<sup>9</sup> A drop scene was the first curtain in the sequence of curtains displayed on a stage. It is also known as the main drape, and sometimes may exhibit some form of design which either may be painted or woven.<sup>10</sup> Drop scenes usually depicted themes that were more classical in nature.<sup>11</sup> Theatre managers may have also used illustrated drop scenes in promoting advertisements of the plays. Thus, theatrical art was utilized for the marketing of plays to attract the populace. In order to do so, they must have been eye-catching and executed with planning, if not with care. It is noted that a drop scene that was made in England was gifted to the Grant Road theatre by Mr. H. Fawcett, most probably in the 19th century. As is referred earlier, stage settings and scenery was imported for the Grant Road theatre from England, as and when the funds permitted. Being on the brink of bankruptcy combined with the technological limitations of that time, Grant Road theatre could not invest in grand scenic designs. However, it must have had to maintain some stock of in-house scenery for serving travelling drama troupes.

A rise in theatrical companies led to the hiring of scenic painters to create theatrical backdrops. Though the Box set had already been introduced in Bombay and innovations were attempted in set design from time to time, we can say with a certain degree of conviction that the theatrical backdrops played a large role in the creation of set and stage design during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Being influenced by the tradition of the Bombay theatre, the Parsi theatre companies initially hired foreign painters to render scenic backdrops.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, Indian hands began to get trained in this art of painting scenic backdrops, leading to the recruitment of Indian artists. In 1847, the Victoria Company is said to have two painters, who even went on a tour to Delhi with the Company, namely the famous Pestanji Madan and a German painter Kraus.<sup>13</sup> In 1866, the old Zoroastrian Theatrical Club was established with one of its partners being the painter Anandrao.<sup>14</sup> He lived in Poona, painted the curtains for this Company and became known for his artistic talents.<sup>15</sup> In 1876, after his takeover as one of the partners and Director of the Victoria Company, Dadi Thunthi is said to have undertaken the touching up of curtains, as one of the main tasks.<sup>16</sup> In the same year, Pestanji or Pesu Madan was later invited to work with the Empress Victoria Theatrical Company.

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9 Mehta. p. 89. However, it seems that artists were paid appropriately for their work. The source mentions the Theatre manager as paying the rent for Mr. Wasencraft while his apartment was furnished in the Theatre. It mentions him being paid Rs. 200 per month in 1818 to make the sceneries. It also mentions the proceeds of the performance of a play being given to his family after his death in November 1828.

10 "Theatre Spaces, Part 2. Proscenium Theatres." Website of Geneseo College, New York. See URL in Bibliography.

11 Mehta. p. 89.

12 Gupt. p. 31.

13 Gupt. p. 105.

14 Gupt. p. 107.

15 Gupt. p. 117.

16 Gupt. p. 120.



The Parsi plays were based on myths and such fabulous fantasy scenes were recreated for audience viewing. For example, Dadi Thunthi, for his Hindi Theatrical Company, employed the Marathi technician Bhawe to recreate the mechanical scene of the fairy Mahrukh transporting Benazir on a flying cot.<sup>17</sup> The scenic paintings of the Parsi theatre were considered as “relatively loud and garish”<sup>18</sup> compared to the ones executed for the Marathi Sangeet Natak. Thus, the Parsi theatre also hired Marathi scenic painters and technicians, who at that time produced works of art in congruence with the themes and content of the Parsi plays.



4.7 Graphics on postcard possibly adapted for depiction of fantasy scenes.

<sup>17</sup> Gupt. p. 170.

<sup>18</sup> Allana. p. 11.



4.8 Possible stimulation of ideas provided for English and Parsi theatrical curtains by these postcards. Notice also the practice of squaring technique on figurines. Courtesy- V. V. Divkar collection.

Marathi Sangeet Natak, with its established profusion of plays, hired scenic painters to create backdrops. Theatre companies usually kept a stock of certain representative painted scenes in their repertoire. These included scenes of the palaces, courts with pillars and arches, gardens, streets, landscape, forts and prisons. In the following narration, a few such painted scenic curtains have been illustrated. Scenic painters were artists who were responsible for creating the theatrical backdrops for the stage settings of various Natak companies. The scenic painter could be either patronized by one company, or he produced backdrops for various companies as and when the need would arise. A scenic painter could either produce the work alone, or utilize the help of his assistants, or even at times collaborate together with other scenic painters to create backdrops.

The scenic painters, however, had to change their treatment of the scenic contents to suite the Marathi Sangeet Natak, invoking a notion of subtle realism<sup>19</sup> achieved through muted tones and persistent blending. To achieve this effect, artists while adapting to this outlook, were developing their own styles at the same time. We have observed that the theatrical tradition of Marathi Sangeet Natak has been rooted in the Sanskrit and historical themes, having a strong base in Indian classical culture. It incorporates various forms of art like singing, music, acting, painting and all its minute presentation details. It is veered towards achieving artistic elevation of these arts through subtle refinement of each of these arts. Reflections of this philosophical outlook is represented in the art of theatrical scenic painting of the Marathi Sangeet Natak and the Marathi theatre in general.

Marathi scenic painters, thus, were connoisseurs as well as advocates of advanced art. Theirs was a contribution to the field of art imbibed with the pioneering spirit without much heed paid to the commercialization of such an art. Hence, these scenic curtains can be intrinsically viewed as fine art pieces.

Marathi Sangeet Natak's traditional use of painted backdrops is said to have begun when the Kolhapurkar Natak Company used it for the first time in 1873.<sup>20</sup> The early 19th century play Saubhadra required the depiction of various backgrounds illustrating the chambers of multiple characters like Lord Krishna, Rukmini, Saubhadra and Arjun. A forest scene was also included.<sup>21</sup> The play Shakuntala produced by the pioneering playwright Kirloskar in 1880 was the first play to have set the stage for the dimensions in Marathi Sangeet Natak scenes. For this play, Kirloskar employed the use of a combination of three-dimensional props like branches, leaves and flowers along with the backdrop to enhance the effect of a forest scene.<sup>22</sup>

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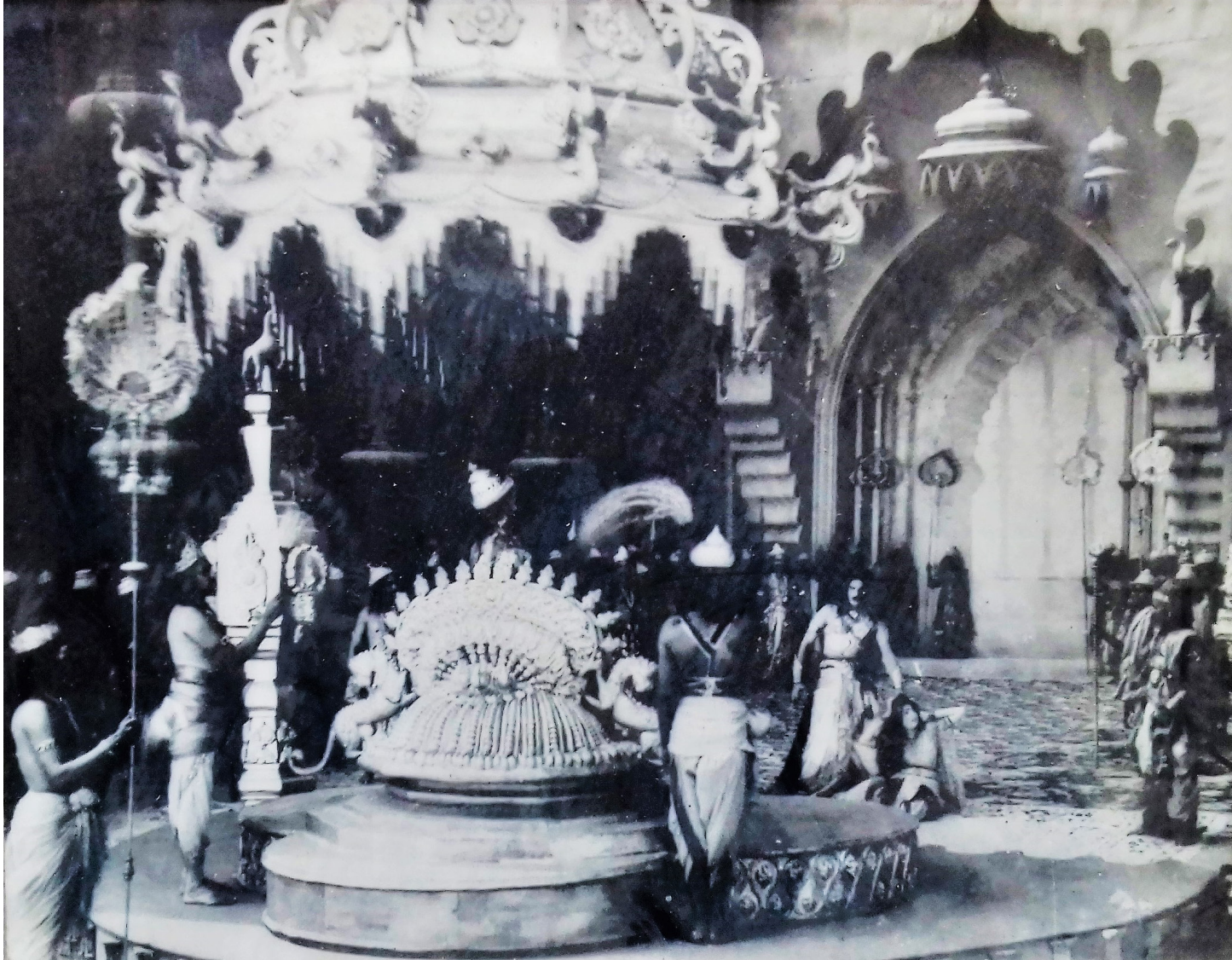
<sup>19</sup> Allana. p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> The Marathi Theatre. p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Allana. p. 26

<sup>22</sup> Allana. p. 23.





4.9 Film Sairandhri produced in 1933 wherein Kitchak's role was performed by Nimbalkar and Miss Leela acted as Sairandhri. Courstey FTII, Pune



This practice became fairly common in subsequent Marathi plays as well. For example, in a scene depicting a royal court or durbar, against the painted backdrops of the palace's looming interiors, one would find props like thrones, bolsters and cushioned seats for the actors to utilize during the play. In 1884, the Kirloskar Natak Mandali produced the play *Rama Rajya Viyog*.<sup>23</sup> The backdrops were created to depict a profound effect of the heights and depths of space through the rendering of the architectural features, especially the ceiling. It is noted that this play utilized painted sceneries which depicted arches.<sup>24</sup>

Early 20th century scenic painters often amalgamated architectural features drawing from both Indian and colonial architecture into one backdrop. A mention here is to be made of the 1906 play *Kanchangadhchi Mohana* produced by the Maharashtra Natak Mandali, whose backdrop curtain depicting a garden scene showed further different uses of perspectives.<sup>25</sup> The play *Manapman*, first staged in 1911, is an example where backdrops with a mixture of architecture was used.<sup>26</sup> But what is also notable about these curtains is that perspective came to be used to such an effect so as to show greater depths in the background.<sup>27</sup> The painted curtains for Deval's play *Sharada* was made by Anandrao Mestry. For the 1913 play *Rakshasi Mahatwakansh*, Anandrao Mestry painted a curtain that depicted a staircase. This representation was special as it created a much greater depth of illusion than ever seen before, and led to a renewed perspective on visual representation at that time.<sup>28</sup>



4.10 Modern-day performance of the play *Gora Kumbhar* with the painted backdrop in the background and three-dimensional props in the foreground. Courtesy- MMSS.

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<sup>23</sup> Allana. p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Allana. p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Allana. p. 27 The *Manapman* scenery showed angles exposing the illusion of depth, and the constant combination illustrative of Indian and Colonial architecture.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Allana. p. 34.





4.11 The original curtain was painted by artist V.V. Divkar, Its utilization has been shown in chapter 1 and 3. Subsequently the curtain was retouched by the scenic painter Mohan Raoul as shown in above image. Courtesy - MMSS collection.



We have to remember that the innovations that took place with regards to the development of the theatrical arts, were always in relation to the gauging of the plays being staged and the effect of such innovations on the audience perception. This was one of the main concerns of the scenic painters that led them to continually innovate and develop the art of painting scenic backdrops. Employment of three-dimensional props and lighting was definitely utilized to highlight the effect of the backdrop. Regarding the backdrop itself, Western fine art principles like those of linear and non-linear perspectives were employed, among other techniques. We will later on take a closer look at this phenomenon.



4.12 A curtain depicting the exteriors of a garden. The architectural elements portrayed here are extremely stylized and their placement is also interesting diverting from the usual position. For example, the bracket is placed at the center of the square entrance at the top of the staircase. Such stylized depiction of architectural forms was a regular feature of scenic curtains. Courtesy - Kala Academy, Panjim, Goa.

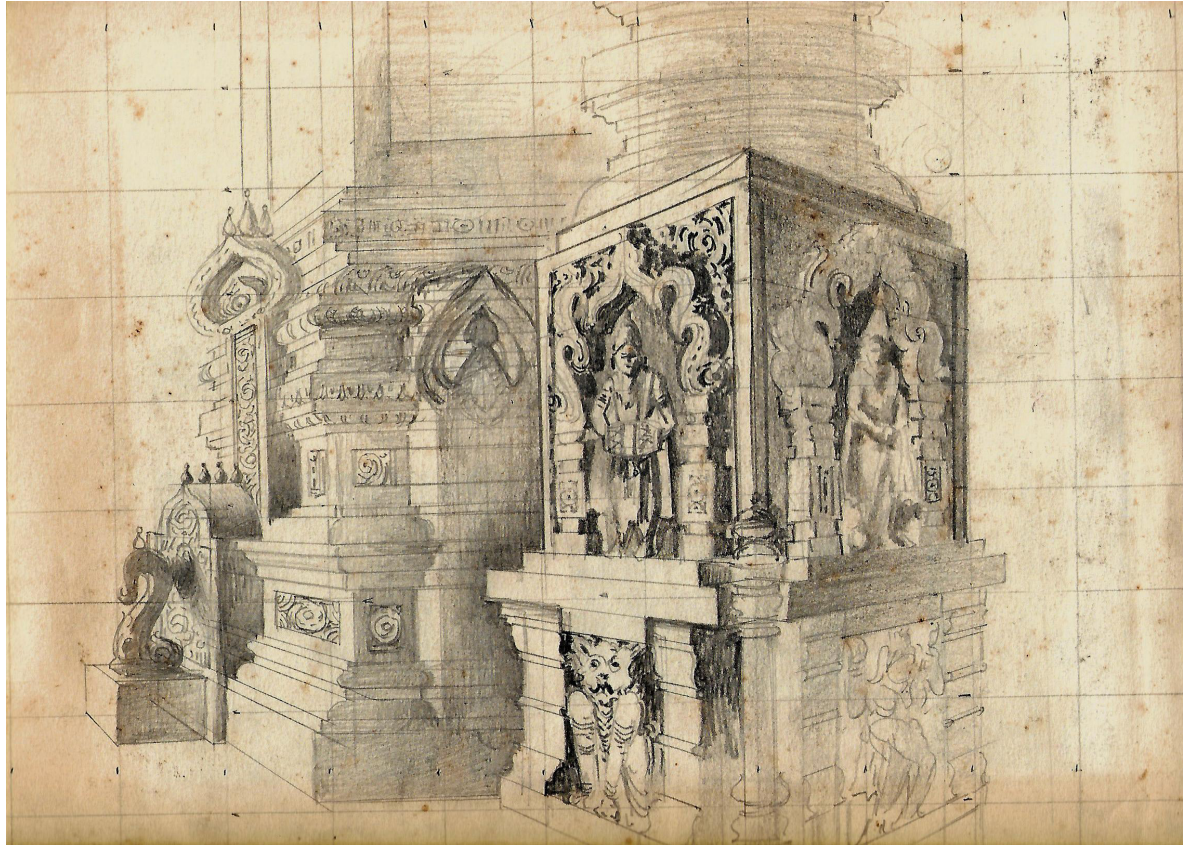




4.13 An scene from the modern staging of a play. In stage setting, numerous properties have been used. A box-set depicts pillars while a painted curtain portrays the foliage in the background. Courtesy - MMSS.



Continuing forth, the play Vidyaharan was produced in 1913 by Gandharva Natak Mandali. The curtains painted for this play by Baburao Mestry were done on a massive scale and were inspired by the theatre architecture of India.<sup>29</sup> Swayamvar written by Khadilkar and produced by the Gandharva Natak Mandali in 1916, was another very famous play in the genre of Marathi Sangeet Natya . The sets of this play were painted by the Mestry brothers as well. An innovation added to the set design at this time were artificial carved pillars leading up to the royal throne on a platform. This set was said to have been sponsored by Balgandharva<sup>30</sup> who essayed the female lead Rukmini in the play.



The play Ekach Pyala produced by the Gandharva Natak Mandali in 1919 required several curtains to be painted, which included scenes depicting the interior of a drinking house, a garden, a lawyer's chamber and a hut.<sup>31</sup> Besides influences from Indian and colonial architecture, other influences were also observed in painted sceneries. For example, the painted curtains of the 1914 play Taramandal, produced by the Maharashtra Natak Mandali, depict columns and figures inspired by Greek aesthetics. Bebandshahi, also produced by the same film company in 1924, utilized a number of curtains, namely to depict a fort exterior, a garden, and interiors of various structures.<sup>32</sup>

4.14 Design of various carved pillars to be depicted on theatrical backdrops. From the sketchbook of artist V. V. Divkar.

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29 Allana. p. 38.

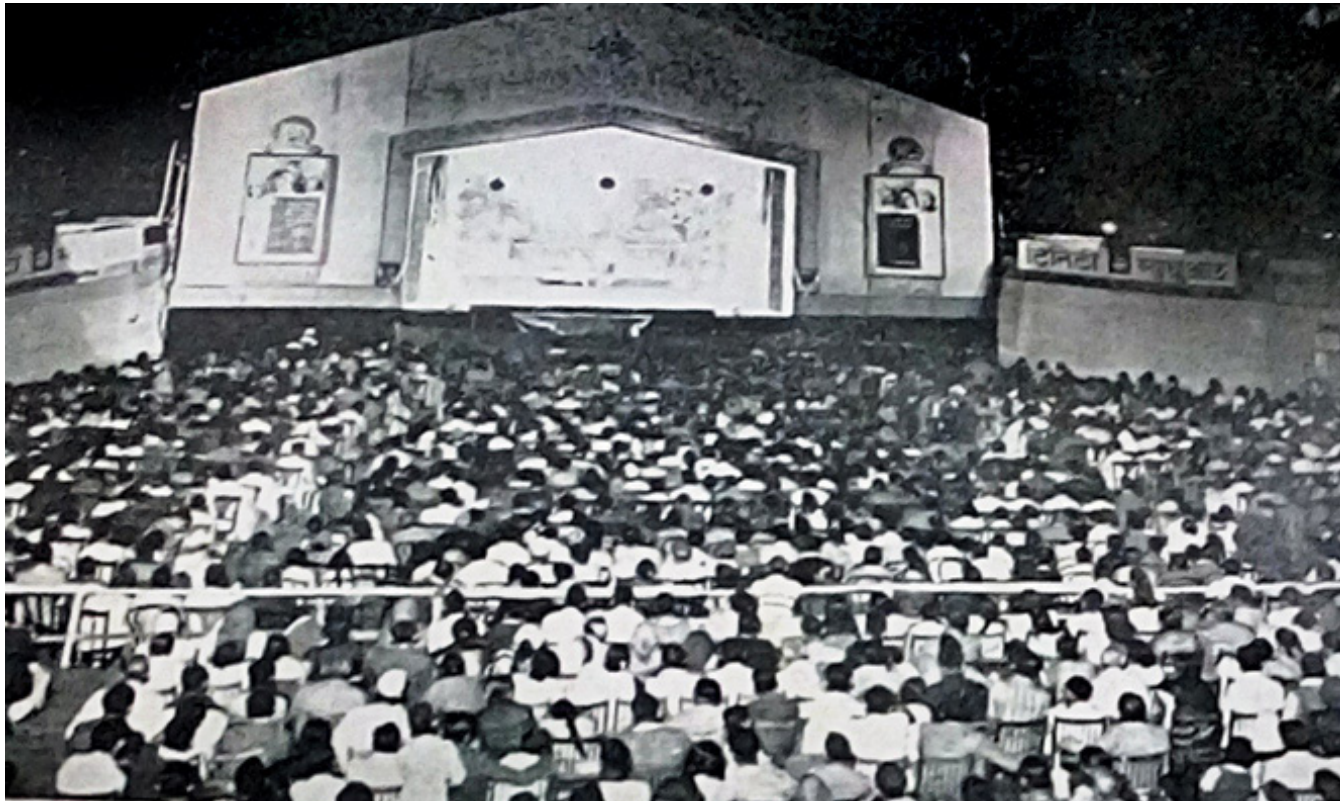
30 Allana. p. 40.

31 Allana. p. 42.

32 Allana. p. 30.



One of the requirements of the scenic painters was to have an in-depth understanding of the size of the curtains and the layout of the stage and the auditorium. In Maharashtra, despite there being a shortage of such spaces, some notable theatres existed like the Dhanwante Rangmandir in Nagpur,<sup>33</sup> which was the first theatre to promote Marathi Sangeet Natak in modern times. The innovative construction of this theatre even garnered praise from the Oxford play-house as being the best theatre they had come across during one of their visits to India. In Mumbai, the theatre of the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh in Kelewadi, Girgaum was earlier an open-air theatre where the Sangh used to organize their annual festivals. The present structure, complete with an auditorium with a large stage, lifts, a foyer and restaurant, and offices for the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh, was designed by Architects Kulkarni and Marathe.



4.15 Performance at Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh's open-air auditorium in the 1950s. Mid day, 04 Nov, 2015.

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<sup>33</sup> Dnyaneshwar. p. 7.

Another prominent theatre is the Ravindra Natyagriha at Prabhadevi. This theatre has also the latest facilities and was built in memory of Tagore. Its construction was sponsored by the Maharashtra Government. Further, the Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangralaya has the oldest and largest library of Marathi Rare Books in Mumbai. This institution had mooted the idea of a third theatre at Naigaum, intended to be a Marathi theatre hub for the masses in North Bombay. However, the plan did not seem to have materialized.

The era of painted scenic curtains began to gradually decline with the introduction of box sets. The box-sets were a step closer to real-life setting and the scenic curtains now came to be used less often. However, the backdrops were being used in conjunction with the box-sets at times. “In the late 1920s, realism entered Indian theatre,” said scenographer Dr. Nissar Allana. “The idea was to create more real, three-dimensional sets. This meant using furniture and walls, with backdrops becoming less popular.”<sup>34</sup>



4.16 Image of a typical box set design from MMSS, Mumbai

<sup>34</sup> Phadke Mithila “Restored backdrops get a gloss, bring old era back on stage.” The Times of India. 13 August 2013.





4.17 Assembling of the Box Set on the stage. Courtesy- MMSS.





Movies took over as the popular form of entertainment. Having greatly reduced the inflow of work for the scenic painters, who then explored avenues of modest means of income like painting banners and advertisements for films or creating backdrops for photo studios. They, however, continued to create theatrical backdrops, albeit for a smaller contingent of touring Sangeet Natak companies in Maharashtra.

Subsequently, in time, Marathi Sangeet Natya began to see a decline in its affairs with the introduction of the silent movies and the talkies. The first cinematography was screened in Bombay at the Watson's Hotel, on July 07, 1896 which was then exclusively for Europeans. The show was even heralded as “the marvel of the century, the wonder of the world” by an advertisement in the Times of India. For the sake of the audience who were still unfamiliar with the new medium, it was described as “living photographic pictures in life-sized reproductions by Messrs. Lumiere Brothers. The entire show is said to have lasted less than an hour.”<sup>35</sup>

4.18 Newsclip obituary of V. V. Divkar. Excerpted block also refers to rendering of drawings for films "Aan" and "Andaz"

Indian cinema then began to utilize the services of the scenic painters to create banners and posters for film. Also, backdrops were rendered for architectural scenes, for example in the depiction of temples and palaces in the background. Such scenes came at a relatively cheaper price and were very realistic. While noting the elevation of their artistic ability it is to be remembered that as for the Sangeet Natak, the same astute skill was applied for showing depth in backdrops, for the scenic paintings of the film type.



On July 7, 1896, Lumieres' assistant, Marius Sestier who was on his way to Australia, presented the first cinematographe show in Bombay at Watson's Hotel, an exclusively European hostelry.



4.19 Watson's hotel where the first of the moving film images were projected by the Lumiere Brothers Co.  
Image source: Wikipedia

THE MARVEL OF THE CENTURY.  
THE WONDER OF THE WORLD.  
LIVING PHOTOGRAPHIC PICTURES  
IN  
LIFE-SIZED REPRODUCTIONS  
BY  
MESSRS. LUMIERE BROTHERS.  
CINEMATOGAPHE.  
A FEW EXHIBITIONS WILL BE GIVEN  
AT  
WATSON'S HOTEL  
TO-NIGHT (7TH instant).  
PROGRAMME will be as under :  
1. Entry of Cinematographe.  
2. Arrival of a Train.  
3. The Sea Bath.  
4. A Demolition.  
5. Leaving the Factory.  
6. Ladies and Soldiers on Wheels.  
The Entertainment will take place at 6, 7, 9, and  
19 p.m.  
ADMISSION ONE RUPEE.

4.19a Advertisement for the first cinematographe show.

Scenic painters that ventured into the film industry not only created scenic curtains but branched out into other fields, mostly into art direction and film production. To note an example would be the early productions of devotional films based on the lives of saints, just like the devotional plays in the realm of Marathi theatre. The film *Tukaram* was based on the life of the great Bhakti poet Sant Tukaram from Maharashtra. It was one of the most impact-making films of Prabhat Film Studios in Pune. Produced and directed by scenic painters-turned-film makers Damle and Fattelal. Despite its subject matter it was a popular hit among all communities and sections of the society including the Parsis, Bohras and Gujaratis in Bombay.<sup>36</sup> It sensitively depicted a realistic portrayal of the daily life and struggles of the common man in the 17th century. This is particularly the reason why even a non-Hindu could relate to and come to like the film.<sup>37</sup>

This film *Tukaram* was released on December 12, 1936 at Central Cinema in Bombay.<sup>38</sup> Throngs of people gathered to watch the shows of the film, breaking all previous records.<sup>39</sup> Though it was released in a politically-charged atmosphere, it went on to provide motivation, solace and inspiration to the masses at a time when it was most needed. It went on to win many accolades at both the national and international levels. It was the first film to be screened continuously for a year straight at Central Cinema,<sup>40</sup> a feat that was not yet achieved by any other film at the time. It was screened all across India. The film was even screened internationally in Britain, China and the Middle-Eastern countries.<sup>41</sup> It won the coveted prize of 'Best Film of the Year 1937' at the International Venice Film Festival, which became a moment of pride for the entire Indian film fraternity.<sup>42</sup> It was the first time that an Indian film was receiving this award. And it was recognized for "the high standard of excellence in every aspect of its production."<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it was said about the film that - "A certain simplicity of approach of its directors and the sincerity of emotions of the principle actors are the twin virtues which raise *Tukaram* above any other film in the same genre."<sup>44</sup>

If one looks into the production of the film, it was a film that was produced on a low budget and in a short time in Marathi. Damle and Fattelal were the directors of the film, both described as renowned artists "adept in the art of costumes, make up, settings and creating suitable atmosphere of the time they showed in the film."<sup>45</sup> They did not harbor grand ideas or unnecessary trick scenes but were successful in depicting true realism. This was the reason that it struck a chord in the hearts of many people across India, despite the language barrier.<sup>46</sup>

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36 Watve Bapu, V. Damle and S. Fattelal: A Monograph National Film Archive of India, Pune, 1985, p. 19. Henceforth Watve.

37 Watve. p. 12.

38 Watve. p. 18.

39 Watve. p. 12.

40 Watve. p. 16.

41 Watve. p. 19.

42 Watve. p. 13.

43 Watve. p. 15.

44 Watve. p.18.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.





Following Prabhat Film Studios Tukaram, two more films on the life of Sant Tukaram were released. However, they did not achieve the same success, and only Damle and Fattelal's Tukaram "became a classic not only for the Prabhat Film Company but a landmark in the history of Indian Cinema."<sup>47</sup> After this, Prabhat Films continued to produce films on the devotional and mythological themes, and achieved considerable success with their films like Gopal Krishna (1938) and Sant Dnyaneshwar (1940). Films that were produced by Prabhat began to be described as a "Prabhat picture" or having a "Prabhat touch."<sup>48</sup>

Here, we can take note of one more example of the city of Pune. Pune has since a long time been a hub of Marathi theatre and culture. Many of the popular permanent theatres were built in the 1920s and 1930s in Old Pune, which are also known as the Peth areas. The Panshet dam on the Ambi River, to the south-west of Pune, burst on July 12, 1961. In this incident, a number of theatres were submerged, with most of them being submerged under 10 to 15 feet under water. In some cases, as in the case of the Bhanuvilas theatre in Pune, entire stages were washed away. In this deluge, definitely affected were the make-up rooms, storage, and theatrical curtains.

4.20 Painted theatrical ventures culminated in cinematic representation. This poster depicting the movie 'Sant Tukaram' was the first Indian film to be granted an accolade at the Venice Film Festival. "Vishnupant Pagnis, the actor, became synonymous with Tukaram, his photos put up in houses as well as temples."<sup>49</sup> Courtesy- Balgandharva Natya Gruha, Pune.

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47 Watve. p. 19.

48 Watve. p.24.

49 Watve. p. 18.



Five Founders Of Prabhat with  
Kalamaharshi Guru Baburao Painter  
from left (seated) V. Damle,  
V. Shantaram, (standing) S. Kulkarni,  
K. Dhaibar, S. Fattehlal

4.21



4.22 Birds eyeview of Prabhat Film Company Ltd. Pune. Source: FTII.



4.23 Prabhat Logo  
Source: FTII, Pune.



This happening in Pune can be cited as a major reason for the scarcity of materials regarding theatrical art in Pune. After this unfortunate incident, many theatres were renovated. The renovation of the damaged theatres, however, was a costly affair and help had to be sought from external parties for investment. These parties would often insist that the theatre buy license from the Pune Municipality for showing movies, and not just depict theatrical plays. Movies were the new upcoming popular form of mass entertainment then. In fact, many of these investors were movie producers, who took advantage of this situation and signed contracts forcing theatre owners to purchase rights and screen movies from only their production houses. Gradually, the theatre receded to the background and cinema became more prevalent.<sup>50</sup>

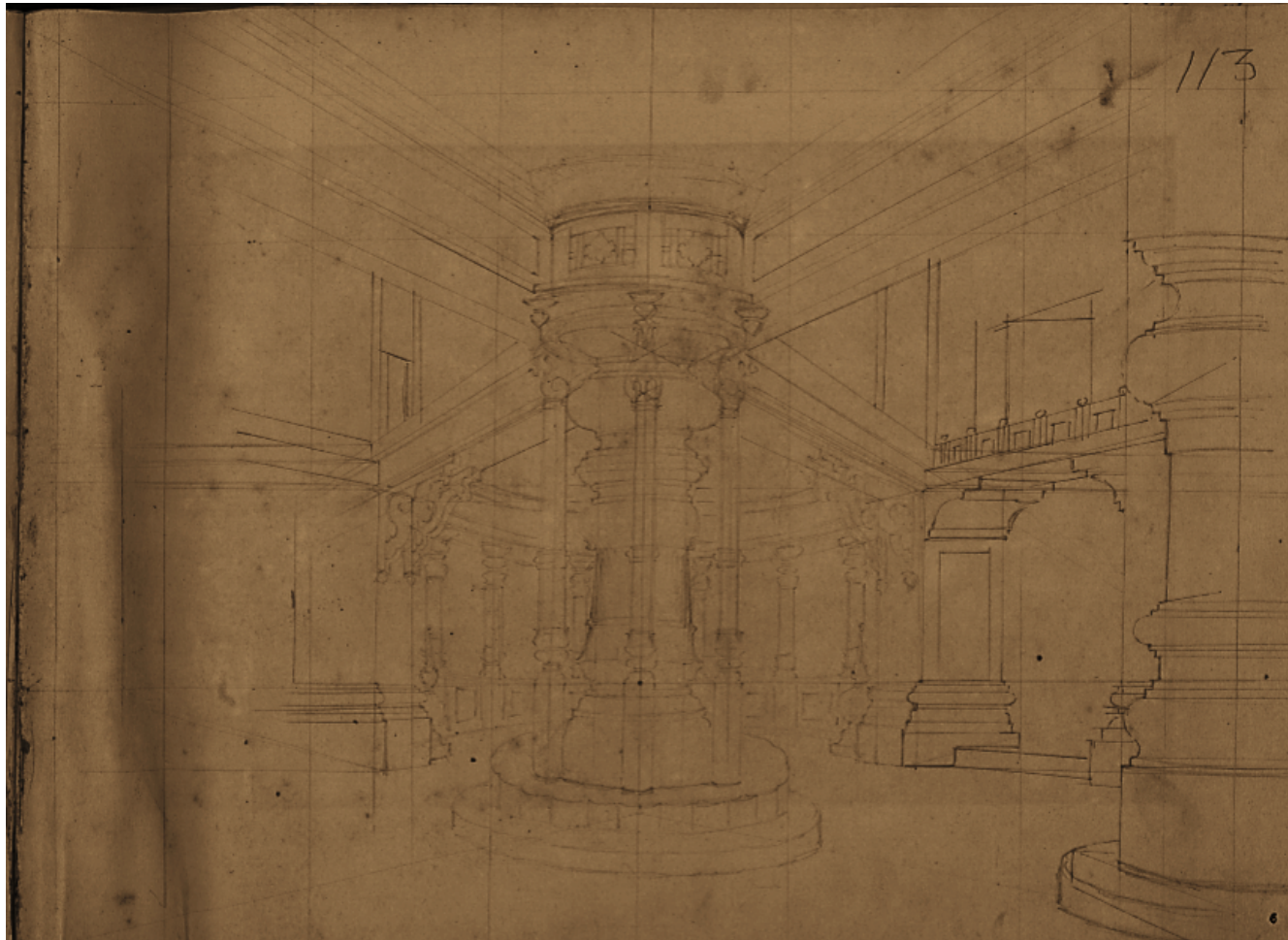
As regards backdrops there are, unfortunately, very few theatrical curtains surviving today. And even less of a chance of an original curtain surviving without any later retouching being undertaken. Many of the scenic curtains have perished due to age or have been discarded by the theatre companies. Only a handful of theatres remain that hold on to their stock of theatre curtains. In the case of Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh, scenic curtains are employed occasionally during the staging of Sangeet Nataks. However, that is not the case with most theatres, where curtains are no longer in use and they just languish in dusty spaces without proper storage measures as required for their conservation. Many a times, during renovation or refurbishment, such curtains are entirely discarded.

We have so far seen how the 19th and 20th century scenic painters contributed to the creation of backdrops. Some drama companies even retained curtains as a stock of stage scenery. Further, we have noted depiction of fantasy scenes and the arrival of the box-scene set-up. Next, we shall observe the artistic development of backdrops as well as the techniques involved. From concept to completion the various stages of the Backdrop while coming into its existence. How it is thus that the combination of technical arithmetic and creative contribution that has evolved the Backdrops as a nouveau art form.

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<sup>50</sup> Information on Pune and its theatres provided by Architect Shreeamey Phadnis through personal correspondence dated 22, April 2018.

## CHAPTER 5 : TECHNIQUES OF THE THEATRICAL BACKDROPS



5.1 Artist rendering for a scenic painting vanishing point objectives in 3 dimensions. Dark points shows various perspectival trajectory. Sketch by artist V. V. Divkar

**W**e have so far glimpsed at the rise of the various theatre companies in the 19th and 20th centuries. Furthermore, with the Proscenium stage coming into use, we have observed the development of the need for theatrical backdrops. It was hence that the scenic painters had their works being used in various Marathi Sangeet Natak. We shall now observe the execution of the theatrical backdrops by scenic painters and delve further into the technical rendering of this art form.



In the field of art in general, the 18th and the 19th century saw a change in the expression of visual and spatial dimension.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true for the theatrical backdrops. There was a marked departure from the flattened perspective traditionally employed in Indian art. With the exposure to Western artistic influence, the use of Realism and Perspective in art began to be greatly emphasized.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the principles of background depictions, artists with their talents and abilities rendered myriad drawings on a wide range of subjects ranging from mythology, society, jungles, villages and cities. However, it is to be noted here that these very subjects brought into foreplay skills of the artists to execute a variety of features such as architectural angles, control of colors, cut - light effects, bright and soft shades and thus enhanced the ambience of the character movements in dramas on the stage. When for example, an actor performed in front of a street scene, it looked as though he was on that street, because the curtain paintings gave a great sense of perspective or depth, to provide the imagery that an actor was actually standing in the street.

In the Western world, in the 19th century, the details of the scenery, costumes and stage business in general was recorded with programmers for historical plays.<sup>3</sup> This unfortunately is not the case with the Indian scenario of 19th and 20th century stage design, especially with regards to the art of theatrical backdrops. We have to admit that among the sparse resources available on the subject, the best sources for study of this discipline would be the theatrical curtains collections. Furthermore, the practice sketch books of Indian Scenic artists pertaining to backdrop design, if available and located, would become the mainstay of theatrical research. For the purpose of this study, along with examples of paintings of theatrical art, we are fortunate to have at our disposal three practice sketch books by the artist V.V. Divkar. These contain his various proposed design sketches for scenic curtains. These we have utilized to further our understanding of this art form which is now being salvaged from the brink of oblivion. Moreover, the methods mentioned here are to be accepted in it's cultural intelligentsia, due to the sheer lack of scientific resources.<sup>4</sup> However, this lacunae can be said to exist in the case of most scenic painters in India.

The curtains, when freshly painted, would display an array of bright hues and color tones; the curtains were deliberately painted brightly to some extent, in order to sustain the luster of the paint for a longer period. This was often done on the demand of the organization placing the order, whose instructions the scenic painter had to follow. Sometimes, the scenic artist would bring about changes in the composition, if allowed by the space and depth rendition of the existing compositional depiction on the curtain. For example, it would be difficult to convert a dense forest scene into a palace scene. Compositional changes while painting may have taken place to manipulate perspectives correctly. No documented evidence of such a practice has been so far located. Composition of the pictorial painted image on the backdrop was also a well thought - out process. For example, if walls were depicted in a backdrop, then embellishments like wall hangings and a painting or two of small sizes were painted on the curtain to bring about the sense of vastness of the backdrops.

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<sup>1</sup> Allana. p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. Turner Jane, Dictionary of Art, "Theatre: Western World: 19th c stage design and costume", Vol. 30. p, 680, New York: 1996. Henceforth referred to as DOA.

<sup>4</sup> What we mean to emphasize here is the non-availability of sheer empirical formulae, geometrical details and mathematical vestiges with reference to Indian Backdrops.

The earliest sources of lighting for plays were candles and oil lamps used during the days of the Bombay Amateur theatre in the 18th century; and Ditmar hanging lamps were used in the diwan khana of the Raja of Sangli in mid -19th century.<sup>5</sup> Thus, innovations in stage design gave impetus to the rise of in-depth forms of scenic painting. In the 19th century, this was further enhanced by the introduction of a more uniform source- the gas lights. These were first introduced in the Grant Road theatre. Marked changes in set design were created by the Swiss architect and stage decor and lighting expert Adolphe Appia in 1891. Appia undermined realism in scenic design and focused instead on manipulating electrical stage lighting. Indeed, this was done to influence audience perception in order to enhance the three-dimensionality of the stage. Later on, with the mathematical contribution of designers like Edward Gordon, the focus came to utilize both lighting and powerful geometrical scenery in order to enhance the stage effects.<sup>6</sup>



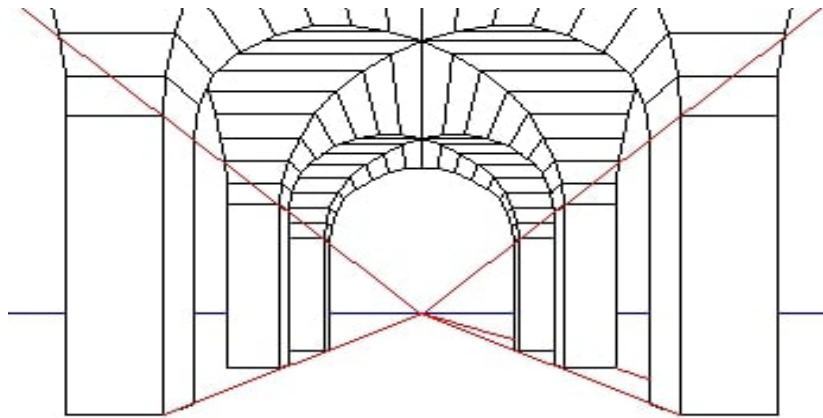
5.2 Scenic curtain showing usage of display of lights. Source: Kala Academy, Goa

<sup>5</sup> Allana, p. 16. Mentioned earlier on p. 38, foot-note 12

<sup>6</sup> DOA. vol. 30 p. 682.



In the 20th century, there was a shift from just picturesque portrayals on scenic curtains to “...an anti-illusionistic style of production that sought to eliminate the physical and psychological barriers between stage and audience. There was rejection of the picturesque to allow more space and a closer relationship between action and the audience. To lessen the separation between stage and audience, the designs featured wide proscenium arches and an asymmetrical arrangement.”<sup>7</sup> This was aimed at an interpenetration of the spaces. This helps us to understand why, in the face of such trends coming forth from the West, that Indian scenic painters also sought to create perfect depiction of lighting and geometrically accurate perspectives on their backdrops.



5.3 A curvilinear perspective is a drawing with either 4 or 5 vanishing points. In 5-point perspective the vanishing points are mapped into a circle with 4 vanishing points at the cardinal headings N, W, S, E and one at C- center. Source: Wikipedia. See URL in Bibliography.

The scenic painters rendered theatrical art on large-size canvas. Influenced by both Western outlines and its adaptation to Indian perspectives, resulted in artistic innovation thereby further enhancing theatrical art. The impact of European art can be clearly discerned with first and foremost the increased use of both linear and non-linear perspective in rendering Theatrical Art. We have spoken earlier of the Indian scenic painters employing the use of both Indian and colonial architecture to create backdrop designs. To state an example of artist V.V. Divkar's practice sketches, one finds the Rotunda<sup>8</sup> design effect. “Through their purity of form such garden rotundas came to encapsulate the architectural ideal within picturesque landscapes. The rotunda was thus transformed from enshrining the imperial paganism of the 'old' world to the republican democracy of the 'new'.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> DOA.vol. 30 p. 684.

<sup>8</sup> “Rotunda.” DOA. Vol. 27. p. 235.

“Rotunda applies generally to a circular building, predominantly domed or vaulted with a circular central space. Originating with circular Greek commemorative buildings, Roman temples and Imperial mausoleums, the rotunda form was used for a number of Early Christian churches and medieval baptisteries and became projected as an ideal form for Christian worship in the early Italian Renaissance. Thus canonized as a general paradigm of antique architecture, the rotunda was used for secular buildings requiring large central spaces such as villas, libraries and neo-classical state monuments. The drum and semi-circular dome are equal in height- thus enclosing a sphere, with the attached portico set out around a square.”

<sup>9</sup> “Rotunda.” DOA. Vol. 27. p. 237.



5.4 Rotunda effect as shown in a scenic sketch by artist V. V. Divkar



The origins of all inspiration with regards to technique and innovation for scenic painters especially from the Renaissance period can be said to have been the art of drapery painting. During this period, there was an increased interest in the representation of human anatomy, linear perspective and moving figures in space. In order to understand the renderings of these, the artists of this period studied the human form, both in the nude and clothed, as well as drapery in great detail. The artists observed and rendered the human body in the nude, how it appeared clothed and how the folds of the cloth would fall. These were then studied under depiction of light and shadow, solids and voids. Changes in rendering the surface details with movement was also noted. Moreover, also pondered upon was how all these aspects would then look as a whole in the given picture.<sup>10</sup>

Though different subjects were employed, the art of scenic painting can indeed be considered as being derived from the art of drapery painting. Scenic painters also had to pay attention to the rendition of individual aspects while taking great care to ensure that the desired effect was being achieved when looking at the overall picture. Besides rendering the illusion of space on a curtain, the scenic painter had to ensure that the elements would be relatively proportional to the actors directly in front of it.<sup>11</sup>

The scale and depiction of the theatrical backdrop is such that the scenic painters would have to undergo training in a number of artistic disciplines like landscape, figurative painting, and false finishing for surface textural details. The artists themselves would have to be adept at understanding and working with various paint mediums such as oil paints, distemper and acrylic. The scenic painter would also possess excellent skills in sculpting, plastering and gilding. For example, the scenic artist Baburao Painter was extremely adept at woodwork, sculpting and painting.<sup>12</sup> This is also true for the artist V.V. Divkar. In addition, more often than not, the scenic painter had a brief time frame to complete the curtain, worked on a tight budget and had to ensure that the end product was not only artistic but also deterioration proof.

During the Renaissance period, there was a practice of apprentices being trained by an established master; such training provided them with the knowledge and skill to be able to work independently. Apprentices were also engaged in assisting the masters with the execution of their artworks, painting most of the background and lesser important aspects of the painting. The initial rendering of the figures and the cloth folds would be done by the master himself. The focus of the painting would then be executed by the master, along with imparting finishing touches to the part executed by the assistants. The workshops were very well - organized, often with artists being experts in painting a particular aspect, having specialized in it. The origin of drapery painters or scenic painters is one of the consequences of such practice. This system was even prevalent in England.<sup>13</sup>

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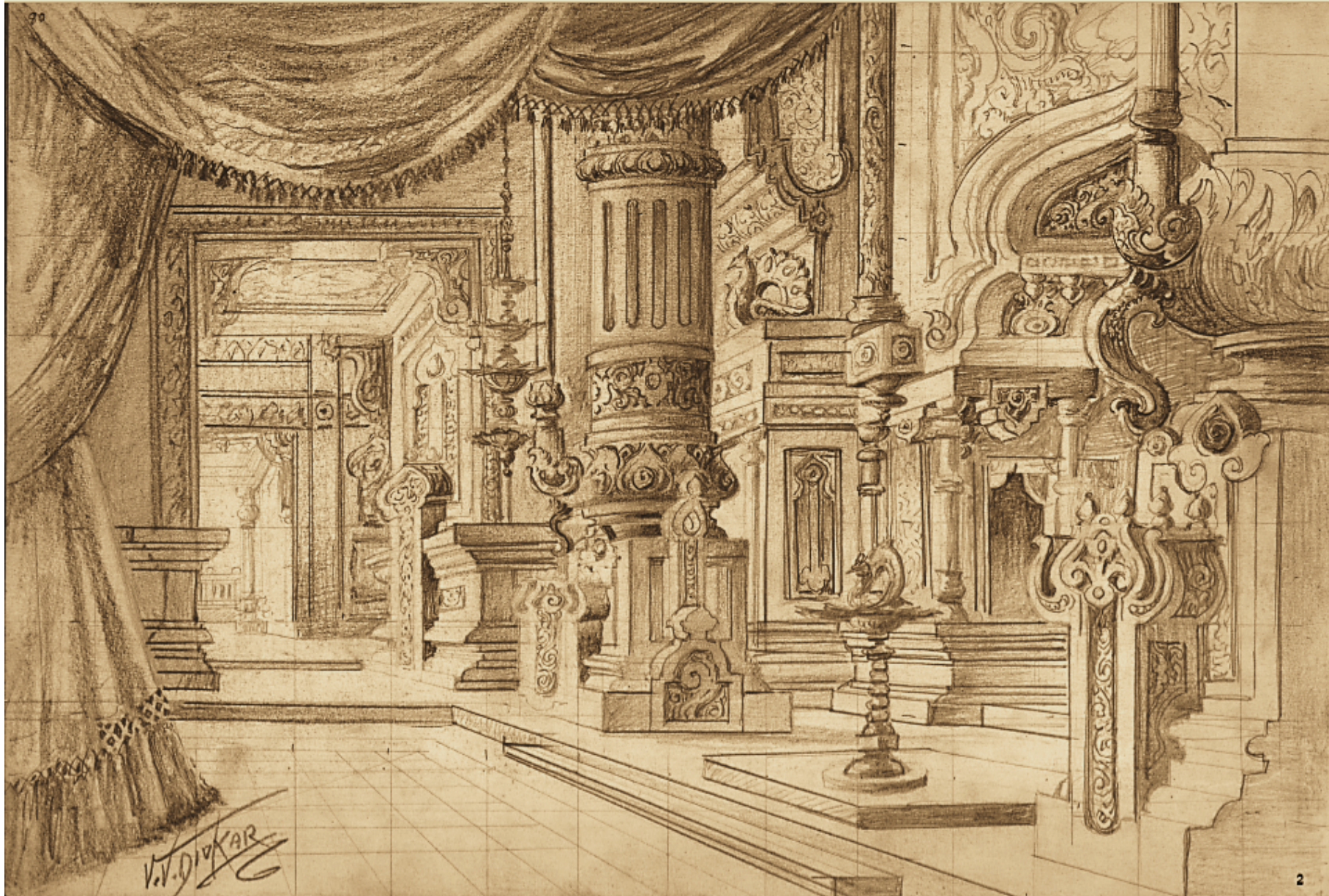
<sup>10</sup> "Drawing." DOA. Vol. 09. p. 213.

<sup>11</sup> "Theatre." DOA. Vol. 30. p. 649.

<sup>12</sup> Garg, p. 31

<sup>13</sup> "Drapery Painter." DOA, Vol. 09. p. 211.





5.5 Proposed sketch showing effect of artistic details highlighting depth and distance through a sidelinear view and cascading drapery from ceiling to the side.  
Art by V. V. Divkar. See pg. 204





5.6 Proposed sketch of multiple artistic features such as ornamentation of the pillar and pedestals, curvilinear fall of drapery folds showing a line of tassels and intricate design details by artist V. V. Divkar.

With respect to scenic painters in India, the present state of research is insufficient and nothing can be said for certain. We know, from oral sources that scenic painters may have employed assistants to aid them with the execution of the curtains. Maybe sometimes, scenic painters also collaborated with each other to create backdrops. The only thing we can say with certainty is that this depended upon the preference of the artist and other prevailing factors like the time available on hand to execute the artworks. An example of this can be found in the case of the Raoul brothers; Ramesh Sitaram Raoul used to work along with his brother, the late Mohan Raoul, on a scenic backdrop. After the death of the latter, he partnered with his nephew, Lakshman Mohan Raoul, to create the backdrops.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of artist V. V. Divkar, it was his usual practice to paint curtains alone. At times, he would invite the assistance of Somnath Naik of Goa who would help him in handling the large canvas cloth, handing over painting materials while V. V. Divkar continued to paint on his own. Somnath Naik would hold up buckets of colors for Divkar and was rarely directed to paint flat colors on the canvas for him. However, it is to be noted here that Somnath Naik learnedly himself observed and later on took to scenic painting.

The size of the painted curtain depended largely on the dimensions of the stage. The early curtains were 18 feet high. The touring theatre companies found it extremely cumbersome to transport these backdrops. Companies like the Gandharva Natak Mandali, the Lalitkaladarsha and a few others utilized curtains that were around 14 feet in height. The surviving examples of painted curtains from the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha are about 14 to 15 feet high with their width ranging from 25 to 29 feet.

The way the theatrical curtains were displayed on stage is through suspension from the top on wooden or metal rods. There were rods at the base of the curtain cloth to keep the weight stable while on the ground. This helped to keep the curtain steady as a backgrounder. To accommodate the rods, there were circular stitched folds at the top and the base of the curtain. Sometimes, the curtains had cloth strings stitched at the base instead, which were used to tie and secure it to the rod. Typically, the folds and cloth ties were already stitched and prepared before being painted upon by the artist.<sup>15</sup> After use, the curtains were either rolled up or folded and always kept, with the paint layer inside. The curtains could be either rolled outwards and unfurled on stage to make it visible; or entire curtains could be vertically lifted up and down, in and out of the view of the audience either through manual or mechanical means.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Phadke Mithila "Restored backdrops get a gloss, bring old era back on stage." TNN. August 13. 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Typically, a thick variant of unbleached cotton cloth called 'Markin' in English or 'Maanzarpaat' in Marathi was used to make the curtains. V.V. Divkar is said to have sourced this cloth from stores in Mumbai and in Belgaum among other places.

<sup>16</sup> "Theatre: Western World: 19th-century stage design and costume." DOA. Vol. 30. p. 686.

"Appia & Craig held that a production should be unified in its acting, design and direction, and that stage settings should consist of screens that could be moved quickly and easily under flexible and imaginative lighting. Appia also realized that lighting was the key to delimiting or expanding a given space, and that a set must be lit with colors sympathetic to the work being performed. Moreover, stage and audience should be close."



## Techniques of The Theatrical Backdrops



5.7 Five steps to unfurling a scenic curtain. Courtesy: Balgandharva, Pune.

The change of acts during plays could warrant the changing of the scenic background multiple times. In modern times, box-sets are used in conjunction with the scenic backdrops. This may be done through suspension of the painted curtain in front of the painted box-set for the initial acts of the play and lifting the curtain out of view to reveal the box set behind for subsequent plays.<sup>17</sup> Only if required for subsequent plays, they were kept suspended in hidden view on the stage. After their use, the curtains were removed from the rod and folded and stored in wooden trunks in a separate space allotted for storage. The curtains are rolled and folded in such a way so as to avoid the formation of creases and flaking of the paint layer.

In most other places the curtains are rolled. Normally, one curtain takes about a month to execute. While MMSS has collection of curtains being 14 ft in height by 28 ft width, at Balgandharva theatre curtains are 30' by 40' and their system is like MMSS to hang such large curtains. Inclusive of paints, materials, transportation and last-minute exigencies the approximate cost to execute a curtain today ranges between 50,000 to 60,000 Rupees and in case of customization can cost up to a lakh of Rupees.

At times MMSS showed some curtains once in 2-3 years, created by Raoul some were fresh ones, while the others were touched up. For MMSS with careful usage curtains lasted for 10-15 years. Further the curtains were kept in good condition since they were also rented out to troupes and theatre. Raoul also painted curtains for Bharat Natya Mandir. These curtains were kept in a separate store room, covered with cloth to keep away moisture. These tasks were allocated to only those handlers who were experienced in the care of backdrops.

The scenic painter while working with the large-scale canvas and design, had to also keep in mind the compatibility of the human dimension on the theatrical curtain. It was an unwritten rule of Theatrical Art to not have depictions of human figures on the backdrops. Nor was the scenic artist aware of the height of the actor and actress which could range from 4' to 6'. In such a scenario, he had to ensure that the scale of the elements depicted on the theatrical curtain did not stand out or look unnatural in the presence of many characters before it during the plays performance. This was a consistent feature of the theatrical curtains regardless of their arrangement whether in the front, middle or rear of the stage. Hence, painters indeed developed and possessed a shrewd understanding of dimensional requirements of the painted image of the curtain and of the human anatomy. Thus, it makes wonderful sense that actual humans acting value was being enhanced after their physical arrival on the stage due to the dimensional correctness of the backdrops. It was to the credit of the scenic painters to bring about this liveliness in the realm of Backdrops.

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<sup>17</sup> Information courtesy Shri Subhash Bhagwat, Secretary, MMSS. Oral interview conducted on 31/03/2018 at MMSS office.





5.8 Interchanging of two scenic curtains as shown at MMSS auditorium, Mumbai. Courtesy: MMSS

In the 18th century, Denis Diderot explained in his 'Encyclopaedie' stated that the true color of objects in the foreground would be affected by the change in the distance of the object. He also believed that coloring and aerial perspectives depended much more on the aesthetic judgement and instinct of the artist, rather than any scientific or mathematical concept.<sup>18</sup> This indeed establishes the fact that production of any artwork is essentially a personal process that speaks of the genius embedded within the artist. "In the course of the 19th century, artists such as Turner, Constable, Courbet, Manet and Monet began to reject the tenets of traditional perspective theory as they attempted to capture the brilliance of natural light and color using more vivid hues and fewer gradation of intensity and value."<sup>19</sup>

Thus, rendering Theatrical Backdrops involved dual combination of technical contribution as well as creative expression. It required much conceptual planning first in the brains and then to imprint the images on canvas. But light effect, depiction of shadows to the finest extent and usage of moldings effectively created what amounts in today's technology as three - dimensional illustrations. Let us now explore the technical avenues of this Art. What exactly we mean by techno - artistic renderings of backdrops. Remember we have emphasized earlier that a range of subjects are involved in the art of theatrical depictions.

Scenic designers are responsible to create the stage and set design. The scenic designer may submit the design in the form of scaled paintings or photographs, sometimes even with original research. While providing swatches of paint samples for specific design areas at times, they paint their own designs. Scenic painters are those who are expected to execute the designs perfectly. This could lead to the possibility of the scenic painters being considered as sub-ordinate to the scenic designers.

The scenic painter in India was responsible for both the design and the execution of a theatrical backdrop. Scenic painters usually would have prepared a smaller sketch of the design to be executed onto the backdrop. The design could either be a rough sketch, a general outline or a more detailed rendering of the space by the artist. Mastering rendering of artistic techniques perfectly on a surface of a particular dimension and transferring the image into a different scale itself tests the perception and mettle of the artist. Further any discrepancies in the original sketches of the design and the final rendering may be indicative of adjustment, adaptation or retouching.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Perspective." DOA. Vol. 24. p. 494.

<sup>19</sup> "Science and Art." DOA. Vol. 24. p. 495.

<sup>20</sup> "Drawing." DOA. Vol. 09. p. 212.





5.9 Proposed sketch for a scenic painting depicting highly stylized pedestals and brackets and partial glimpse of the curvilinear rotunda perspective by artist V. V. Divkar.

A curtain, on account of the wear and tear encountered due to repeated handling and age - related deterioration, would require retouching every seven to ten years.<sup>21</sup> The Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh has restored about fifteen of the cotton backdrops in its possession. Some of these restored backdrops are once again being brought back into use and being displayed as backgrounds for selected dramas, “allowing spectators to briefly step back into a forgotten era.”<sup>22</sup> According to Dr. Allana the restoration of these backdrops was undertaken as it was considered vital to understand the development of scenography in local theatres.

The restoration was carried out by the veteran scenic artist Ramesh Sitaram Raoul. According to him, “Lifting years of paint off a much-used backdrop takes a deft hand, staggering patience and a potent blend of ‘saras’ and water.”<sup>23</sup> He further explains that - “We need to paint lightly on it and do the ‘shade-light’ effect as we go along”. “The fabric is spread across the floor, and sometimes, two people work on it together.” However, we are to remember over here that many a times, scenic backdrops are touched up due to lack of luster and old age. Subsequently, the name of the touch-up artist is more prominently displayed, and at times, the original artist’s name gets obliterated.

Practice sketches or drawings would be the initial medium in which the artist would “record, outline and document images that the artist has observed, imagined, recalled from memory or copied.”<sup>24</sup> In essence, the initial flow of artistic thought and imagination is captured by the artist in the preliminary drawing. The Dictionary of Art states that - “It is that spirit of invention and originality that has lent allure and renown to the drawings of great masters, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Degas and Picasso.”<sup>25</sup> The same can be applied to Indian Scenic artists like Baburao and Anandrao Painter, V. G. Damle, Shaikh Fattelal, P. S. Kale, V. V. Divkar, Junnarkar, Raoul Brothers, Hari Singh, etc. Herein it can be seen thru V. V. Divkar’s sketches of proposed curtains, that range from the preliminary renderings of architectural outlines to the very detailed ornamentation of the elements, to full-fledged drawings depicting entire vistas of the interiors or outskirts of royal palaces. The depiction of trees and foliage, which we find delicately rendered with paint on the backdrops, almost creating an effect as if it will initiate movement with the breeze. However, the depiction of depth and scale through perspective and the play of light and shadow areas depicted have been rendered in perfect detail in both his sketches and painted curtains. His sketches are of special significance to study his use of lines and planes depicted in relation with lighting on scenic backdrops.

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21 Oral interviews conducted with Mr. Ravi Patil, from Manoranjan, Pune.

22 Phadke Mithila “Restored backdrops get a gloss, bring old era back on stage.” TNN. August 13. 2013. “Every drape takes about 10 days to restore and requires significant financial investment. But the results seem worth it, feels Shubhash Bhagwat.” the Secretary of Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha.

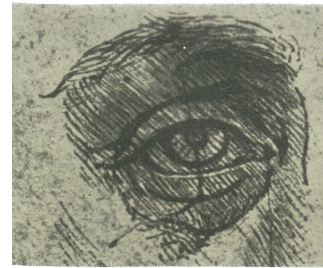
23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 “Drawing.” DOA. Vol. 09. p. 212.



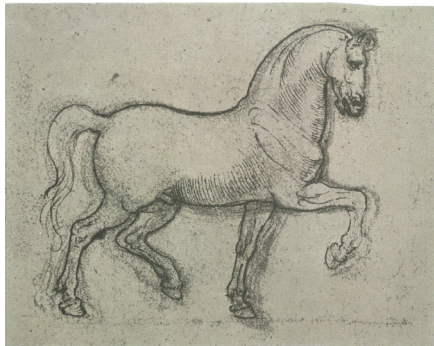
Artists were always interested in penetrating analysis of the human body. All artists painstakingly made a study of myriad forms of life. Let us have a comparative look at Western and Indian artists' drawings.



The human eye depicted in outward form.

Leonardo Da Vinci was a pioneer anatomist. Almost every Renaissance artist made studies of the human body. However, Leonardo based his sketches on the observations of bones, muscles, nerves and veins. This attention to detail led him to formulate ideal proportions to drawing figures as is shown on a man's face scaled to ideal proportions.

Plants and animals intrigued artists as much as the human figures. For example, the analysis of structural similarities between the legs of horses and humans was one of the first known studies in the field of comparative anatomy. It is said that Leonardo Da Vinci produced

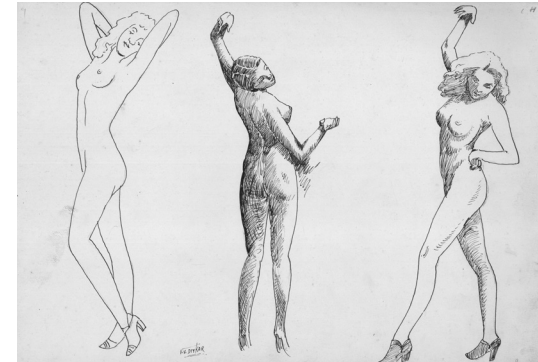


Prancing horse, a sketch of an equestrian statue for the Duke of Milan.

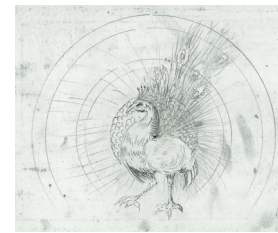
the most beautiful and accurate anatomical studies of his day.



Feline poses, a study made for a treatise on the movement of animals.



Similarly, Indian Artists had an equal fascination like Leonardo for internal structure and outward form. This can be highlighted through drawings of various scenic painters, if available. In this case, the sketches of V. V. Divkar provide us an opportunity to highlight the significance of anatomical proportions through his practice drawings of the human and animal form. It is to be noted here, that centuries apart artists



were pro-efficient in rendering practice drawing of the anatomy in proportion and scales. The drawing shown here of the Indian scenic painter and the Western artist both reflect depth and dimension.



#### 5.10 Anatomical western and Indian sketches of Humans and Animals.

Artists can render an initial drawing at a different scale using the concept of 'squaring'. The technique of squaring involved drawing gridlines at right angles over the entire drawing.<sup>26</sup> This was also a technique followed by V.V. Divkar, as is evident from the practice drawings in his sketch books as well as independent drafts on large-size paper of designs for theatrical curtains. Divkar created copies of his curtain designs in multiple formats, with the rough sketch being rendered on elephant - size paper and the final, finished painting on a smaller scale. One such example is of a draft sketch he created on brown paper sheet measuring 2 ft 8 inches by 3 ft 14 inches having 45 horizontal squares by 32 vertical squares that illustrates a scene from the play 'Sita Swayamvar'. The drawing has been created in black with white highlights. The sheet was overlaid with both horizontal and vertical gridlines, apart by one inch each. The boxes have been numbered in certain areas, possibly to ascertain the measurements of certain components of the design. The gridlines would have then been drawn on a larger scale on the backdrop cloth. After which the design would be recreated onto the huge cloth, albeit with the help of the gridlines used as a reference. It may have probably been intended to be a proposed submission for a work order from a theatre company. However, as this design seems to have culminated in a theatrical backdrop, we need further substantiation to establish its existence in a backdrop form.

Art and science have since long been considered as far removed from each other. Out of the two, science is considered to be a rational explanation of knowledge and art merely a representation of forms and colors, which may or may not be based on reality; they are often assumed to be polar opposites today.<sup>27</sup> However, we have to realize that art and science are based on keen observations and study of the same phenomena that occur in nature, and as such "...share common bases in motivation, creativity, aesthetic impulse, perception, cognition and social causation."<sup>28</sup> In trying to recreate perfect renditions of structures and other elements in a backdrop on a given space, that is to create three-dimensional effects on a two-dimensional surface not only required artistic skills but also the understanding of scientific concepts as utilized by the scenic painters to create backdrop designs. Perhaps the most significant of them all is the concept of perspective in art. Perspective which can either be linear or non-linear.

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<sup>26</sup> "Drawing," DOA. Vol. 09. p. 218.

<sup>27</sup> "Science and Art." DOA. Vol. 28. p. 199.

<sup>28</sup> "Science and Art." DOA. Vol. 28. p. 199. "The dominant feature in attempts to provide art with a mathematical base, at least from ancient Greece to AD 1900, has been the conviction that beauty can be founded on a set of harmonic principles that are susceptible to mathematical definition. It is attractive to think that the paintings of a mathematically minded artist, are organized according to principles of geometrical harmonics."





5.11 Detailed depiction of squaring technique showing the drawing for 'Sita Swaymwar' by artist V. V. Divkar. Not only are the grid lines numbered but even the pair of peacocks shown in left hand corner of this practice sketch are proportionally drawn. This sketch has been drawn on brown paper.

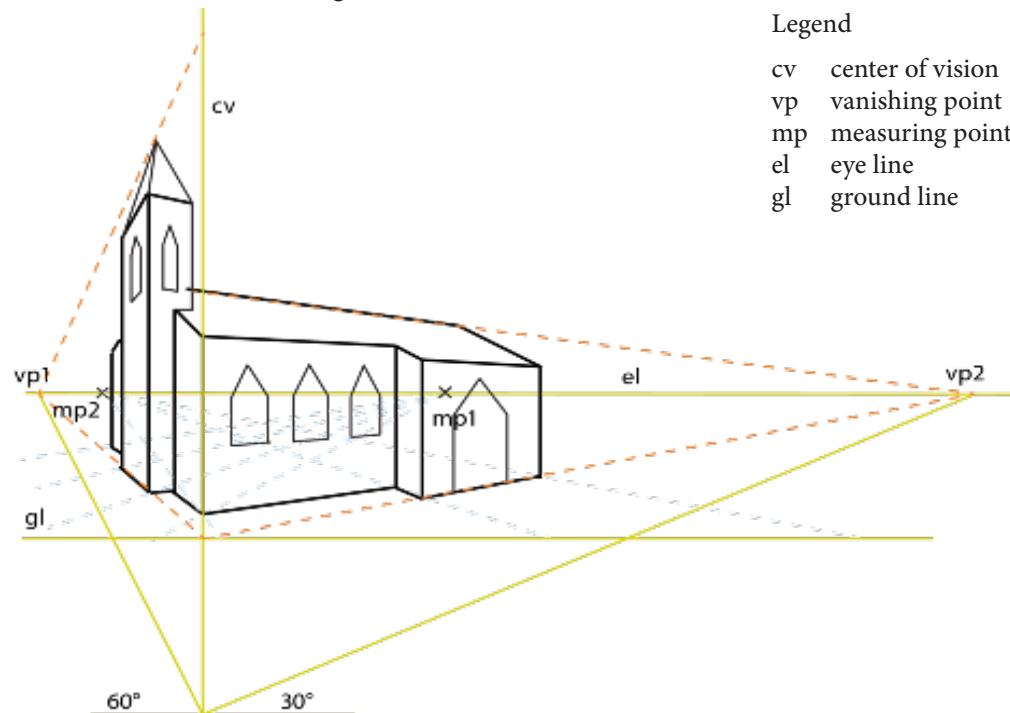




5.12 Pillar structures finalised with embellishments. Pencil sketch by artist V. V. Divkar



Furthermore, perspective is a form of optical illusion used to give a three-dimensional effect to the picture.<sup>29</sup> This is primarily what the scenic painters used well to create an illusion of a large scale and depth in a painted curtain. Perspective was particularly used in backdrops to execute the painting with as correct as possible a view of color and depth perception in order to achieve a three-dimensional effect. Objects were executed in the foreground which would typically be sharper and more defined while the details got blurrier as they got higher or receded into the background.

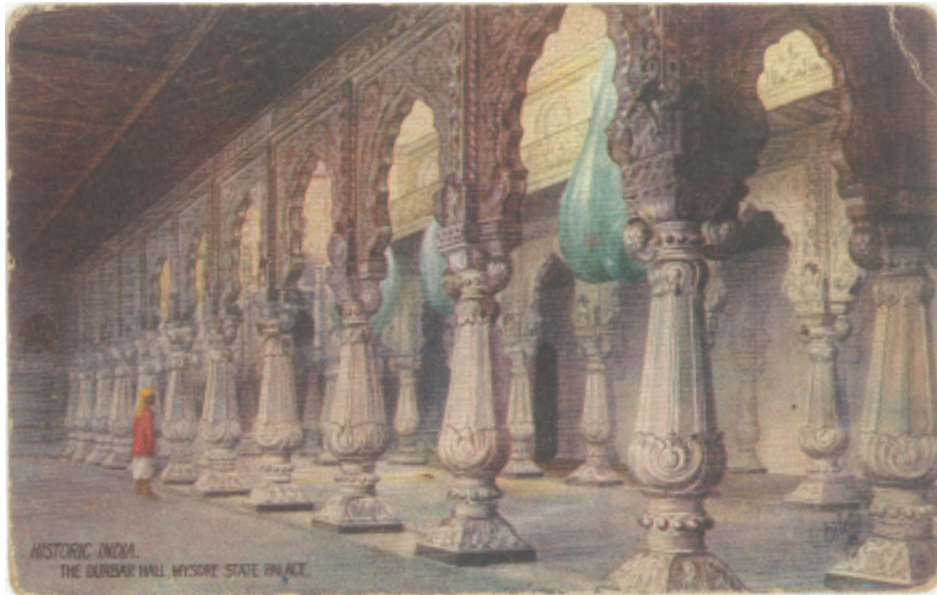


5.13 Two point perspective drawing showing the legend as depicted. See URL in Bibliography.

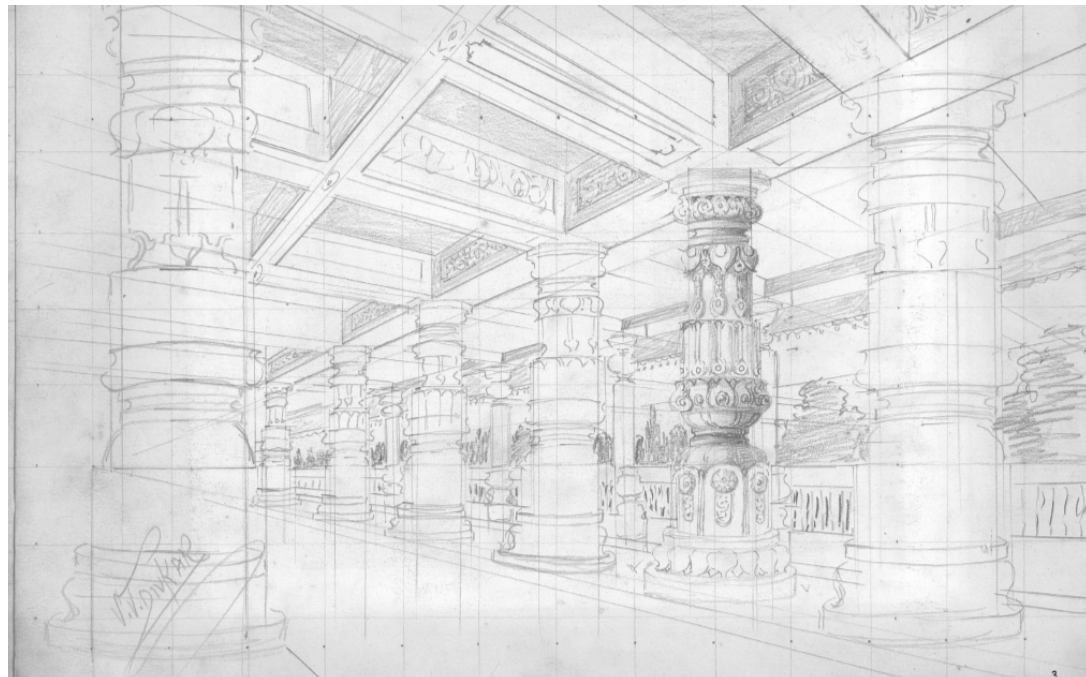
With regards to the linear perspective, one has to take note of the concept of the Vanishing Point. In one-point perspective, all lines emanate from one point of convergence at the horizon or in a far distance. That is the vanishing point. It can be considered as the central point of a drawing or painting. Where the point of convergence is a single-point in a drawing, it is termed as one-point perspective. However, there also exists two-point perspective, where there are two points of convergence, one each at the left and right, at a distance. Furthermore, we can have three-point perspective where there would be three points of convergence. The artist's observation skill, deduction and vision lay in placing the multiple points of convergence in proper places so as to create the correct illusion of the three-dimensional depth of space. It is said that the lines below the viewer's vision slant upwards and those below slant downwards, typically towards the central vanishing point. Those at the level of human sight remain horizontal.<sup>30</sup>

29 Ibid. p. 202. "The continued concern of mathematicians with the implications of artistic perspective during the 18th century is reflected in the research of Brook Taylor (1776-1823) who published succinct mathematical treatments of perspectival projection. Later in the 20th century developments in computer graphics, computer-aided design and ray tracing made available techniques of great power for the representation and manipulation of space, light and color in endless static and dynamic variations."

30 "Perspective." DOA. Vol. 24. p. 489. "The Commentary by Danti is characteristic of the mathematicians and scientists in the later 16th century. The mathematical treatments culminated in Guidobaldo del Monte's *Perspective libri sex* in 1600, in which the full rationale of the projective geometry of perspective was demonstrated at length. Above all del Monte showed how to determine the vanishing point for any given line and how to project any given shape on to a plan according to the relative position of viewer, plane and object."



5.14 Such postcards became a source of inspiration for scenic painters like V. V. Divkar to render perfection of similar images on the curtains. Collection of V. V. Divkar.



5.15 Sketch of one point perspective combined with vanishing point as depicted from the above postcard as a source. By artist V. V. Divkar



We have observed marked departure from flattened perspectives to linear perspectives; we have seen the significance of the material left behind, such as postcards, practice sketchbook, paraphernalia, studied the 'rotunda' effect, drapery painting and human anatomy, the display and storage of stage curtain, technique of squaring and grid lines, vanishing points, justifying the various sequences of the formation of the backdrop as an art form.

Therefore, we need to observe and understand how a theatrical backdrop for Sangeet Natya came into existence. Curtains from concept to completion were rendered in phases. Initially when the concept was mooted, the artist and the drama company exchanged some form of correspondence, either as letters or postcards. (see image 1.5 on page-14, and image 6.6 on page-132) The artist then responded to the initial letters with an affirmative wherein further details were exchanged, such as the nature of the subject, exact size of the curtain, which auditorium it was to be displayed, time frame, type of colors and any other additional features.

After confirmation of above factors, the artist went about creating the curtain from this nascent stage. Following the squaring technique, he rendered the gridlines on drawing paper. Next, pencil sketches in rough were created emphasizing various features. With the intention of incorporating these features in his main drawing, the artist gave finishing touches to his pencil sketch. Finally, he made a smaller size painting in color to show the finished effect of how the larger curtain would look when completed on an 18ft by 30ft canvas.

To understand the graphics involved and to gauge the dimensional basis of such drawings please see Appendix 2 on page-166-167 which also reflects the 'Rotunda' effect in the colored painting 'Akbar at the Temple'. Further, in an ink drawing on squared grids in black and white showing the Jackal and Deer confrontation, expressing threatening posture on part of the Jackal and fear psychosis by the Deer. Next, the in-defense stance of the Deer throwing off balance the attacking Leopard at the cliffs edge. Both these sketches can be observed in Appendix, page-165.

Moreover, optical distortion of the human eye increases the further it gets away from the vanishing point. Thus, there is a great margin for error occurring in the case of drawings or paintings in a very large format. One can at this stage, only admire the mastery of the scenic artists of their techniques to render objects in three-dimension on a huge canvas as fast as physically possible. Working with such speed meant that the correct placement of the vanishing points was imprinted on their minds such as they could recreate objects wherever they wanted and as they desired it to be depicted, given that the required means were available. This is also a testament to their years of practice and the perfect understanding of correct perspectives.<sup>31</sup>

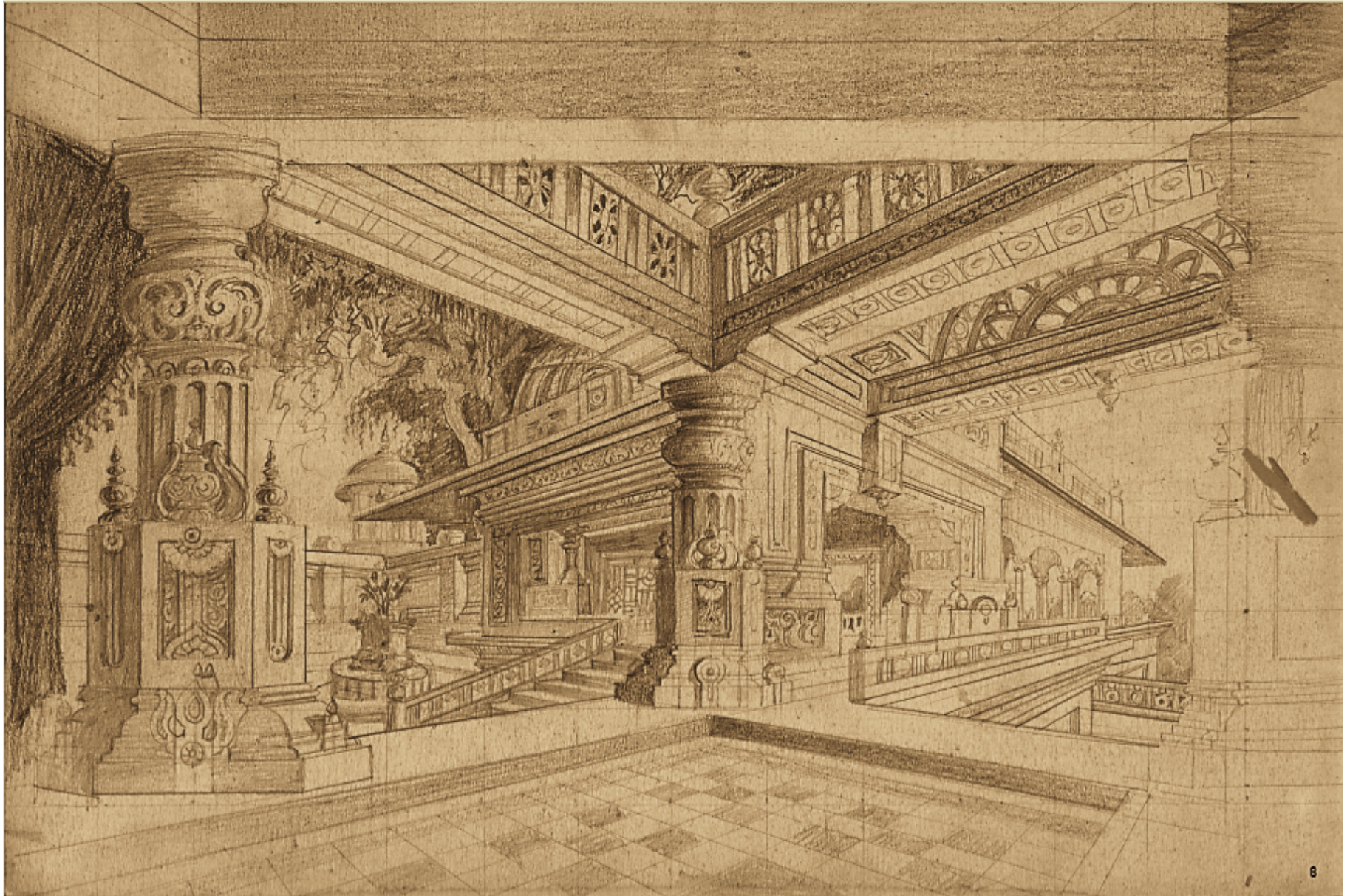


5.16 Scenic impression of the understanding of correct perspective. Courtesy: Kala Academy, Goa

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<sup>31</sup> Vanishing point excerpt. Author's interpretation of the then existing scenario.





5.17 Sketch of a curtain painting displaying a great sense of perspective and depth through multi axel ceiling. Artist V. V. Divkar

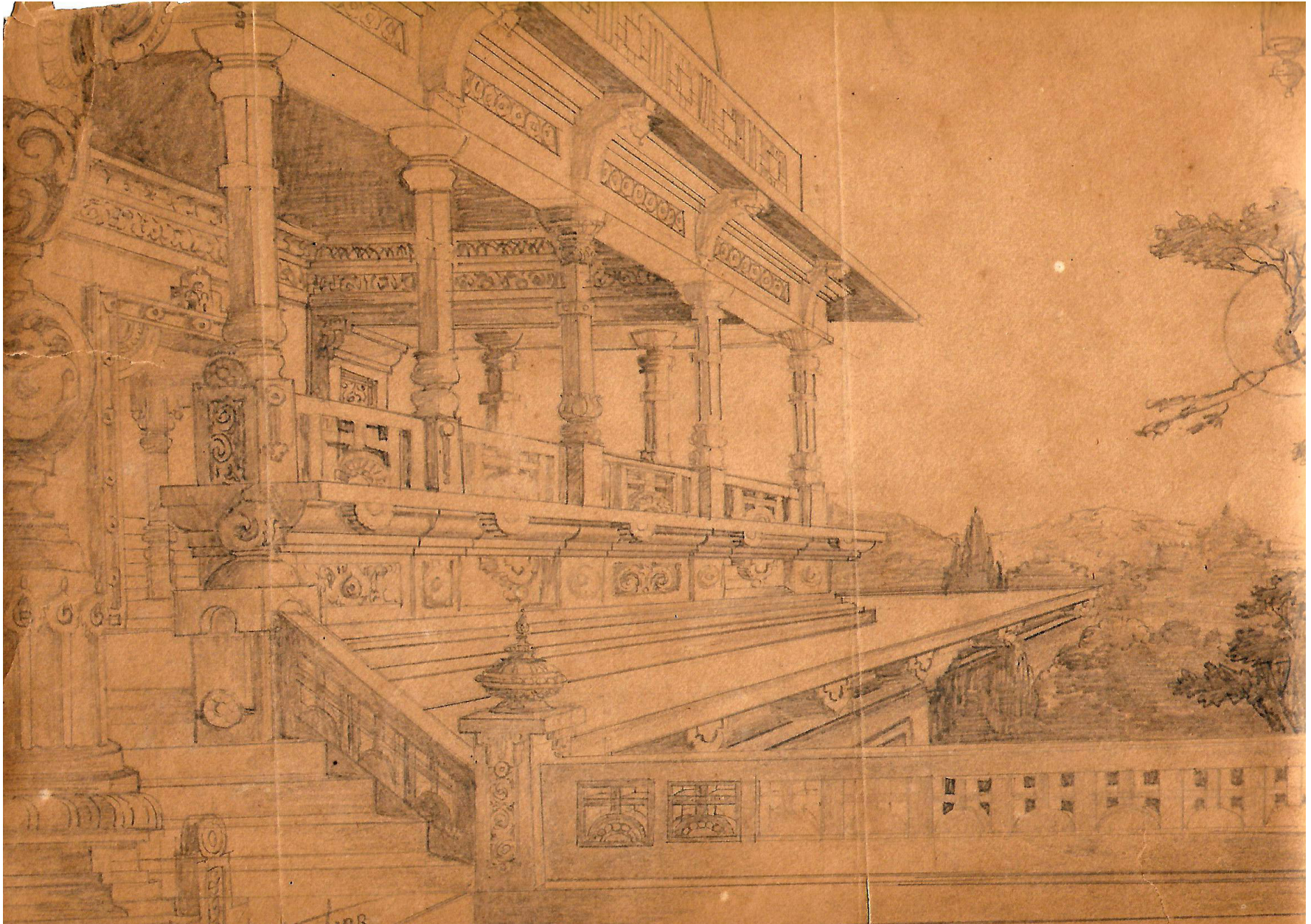
Linear perspective is used to impart a three-dimensional look to the drawing or painting. The principle element used in linear perspective is the Vanishing Point. It is also known as the Point of Convergence. The vanishing point is a point at the horizon in which all parallel lines emanating from the imagined foreground of a drawing or a sketch merge in the background. Image should be viewed from the vanishing point as the eye-point for a correct understanding of perspective. Architectural drawings use geometrical tricks to converge three-dimensional aspects of realities on two-dimensional surfaces. Such geometrical techniques are employed to create an illusion of scale, depth, distance and other features of reality.

One- point perspective is a fairly easy concept to work with to render three-dimensional scenes. With a singular vanishing point, mistakes made can be identified and rectified. Though not the most accurate it is sufficient to quickly show the concept of an object or a scene to another person. This concept enables human comprehension and is therefore understood by everyone, even those without an artistic or a technical background. Further, it lends itself easily to free-hand sketching too.

The position of vanishing points is not necessarily only at the center of the canvas. A sketch or a drawing may have multiple vanishing points those are not in the center of the canvas which makes the composition more biased towards one side. One has to define Focus area as detailed as possible, and lesser factors on the other side. Therefore, placement of objects has to be conceived and decided well in advance.

The horizon is also referred to as the Vanishing Line. In two-point perspective, subject is angled towards the two points. An increase in the vanishing points, increases the complexity of compositional arrangement. However, experienced artists can render a drawing by only imagining the position of the vanishing point, having honed their understanding of the correct use of perspective after years of practice. Artistically speaking, different subjects required competent technical skills on part of the artists both for usage of space and understanding perspectives while painting on large canvases.





5.18 Linear perspective where the artistic touch for image of a royal palace is depicted. Sketch by artist V. V. Divkar

Used along with the linear perspective, we have the concept of non-linear perspective. Simply put, it refers to artistic rendering techniques such as color tones and shading, surface texture, and degrees of sharpness of the painted image to enhance the effect of illusion of depth.<sup>32</sup> Non-linear perspective, though described as a non-scientific system, in fact adds to the linear perspective to create a more enhanced effect of realism. Non-linear perspective is more veered towards being based on the artistic skills of the painter, and encompasses three concepts namely color, acuity and chiaroscuro. "Color perspectives refers to gradients of changes of hue, saturation, value and spectral colors. Acuity perspectives refers to gradients of distinctness, sharpness, clarity and detail. Acuity perspective is accomplished in painting and sculpture by reducing finish, eliminating detail, blurring edges of the contours and interior forms, rounding angles and eliminating cues of texture. The perspectives of Chiaroscuro refer to gradients that diminish the illusion of three-dimensional form and the separation of a figure from the ground. It is accomplished in painting by reducing contrast between highlight and shadow values. In modelling and in sculpture by shallower carving and low or flattened relief, which have the effects of reducing the contrast of natural light on the sculpture."<sup>33</sup>

The Indian scenic painters were adept at painting scenes for the backdrops according to the light and shade effects of the time of the day, or night, as was to be depicted in the scene. This was again a testament of their excellent observational skills and artistry. Floodlights would be used to further enhance the effect of the light and shading on the painted curtain. The intensity of the light would depend on the time of the day being depicted. For example, the sharpness of the lights would be adjusted to depict the soft light of the evening. The lighting could either be soft or focused, depending on the effect it imparted in enhancing the painted curtain and creating the ambience for the scene. This also requires that the person in charge of stage lighting had to have a thorough knowledge of the stage decor, including and especially of the theatrical backdrop.

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<sup>32</sup> "Perspective." DOA. Vol. 24. p. 485.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 492.





5.19 Night scene of Mumbai Chowpatty of the early 1930s reflecting shade and light. By artist V. V. Divkar.

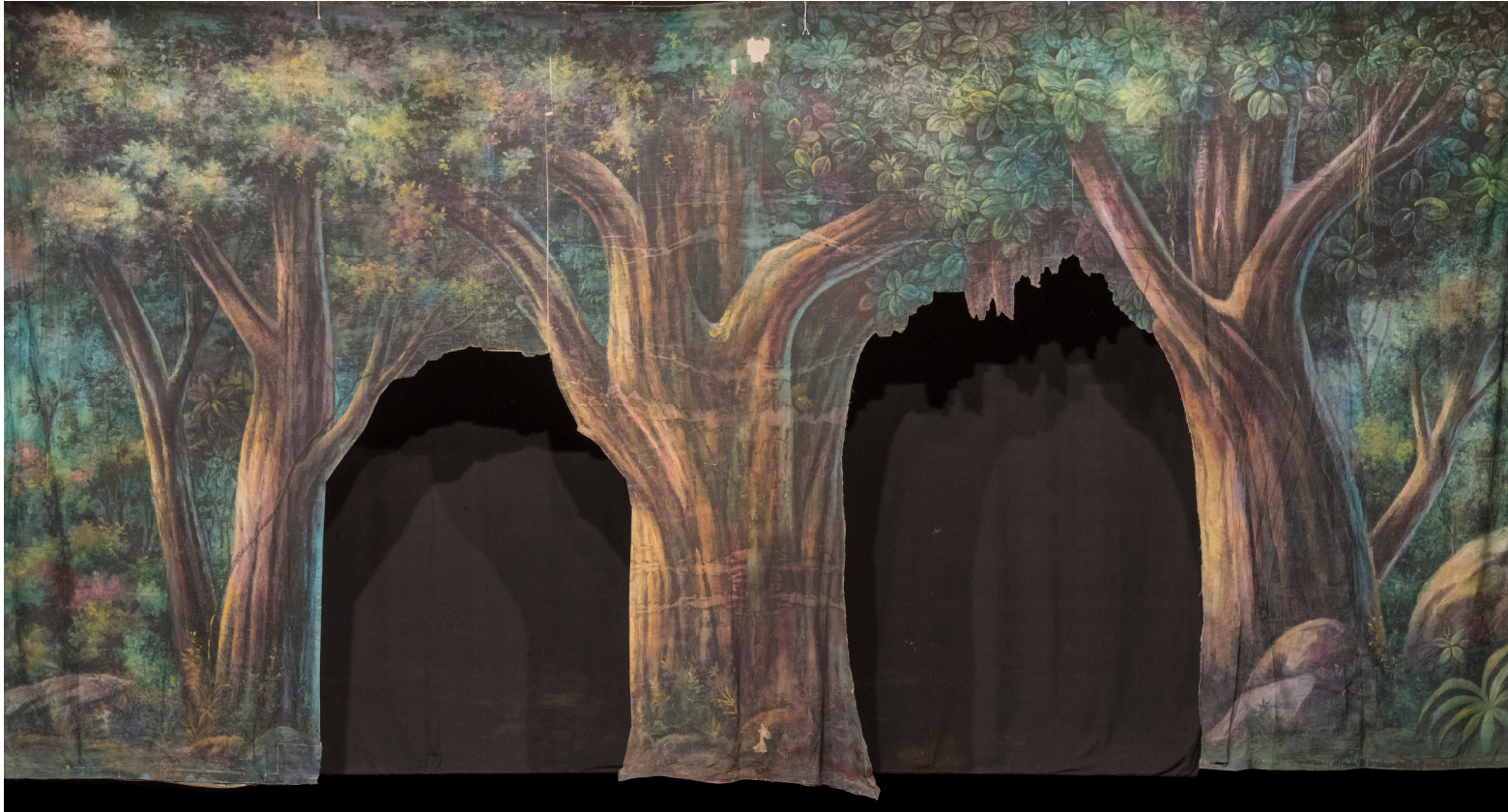




5.20 Scenic painting showing a night jungle scene in non linear perspective reflecting color, acuity, chiaroscuro. Artwork executed by the use of only a mixing knife. Artist V. V. Divkar.



To paint and render surface details, as well as to render the shades of lightness and darkness, an artist could use a number of application techniques, like those of using lighter washes, dots, dashes along with the flat application of paint.<sup>34</sup> The play of light on works of a two-dimensional surface were essentially based on the geometrical techniques of shadow projection.<sup>35</sup> Along with such techniques, optical devices like the net or a veil were employed to create separation between forms and create the illusion of movement and a greater depth between objects that are relatively close to each other.<sup>36</sup> An example of this can be seen in the curtain shown below from the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha, along with another curtain where black cloth has been used as a backing for a painted curtain depicting a jungle with cut-out entrances to create a greater illusion of depth.



5.21 Jungle scene with cut out entrances. Courtesy: MMSS

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 203.

<sup>35</sup> Op. cit. p. 203-204. "...of which Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Durer were the most accomplished pioneers."

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.





5.22 Example of optical device like the net to create separation between forms and illusion of movement showing greater depth between objects. Curtain by Mohan Raoul. Courtesy: MMSS



Indian scenic painters very often would, unlike their British counterparts and traditional studio artists, spread the cloth down on the ground and sit on it to paint.<sup>37</sup> See image 5.23. It is to be understood here that such positioning surfaced with great artistic skill and techniques and this brought to the forefront the artistry of in-depth expressions of various subjects. Whether it be the Western scenic painter with his standing pose or Indian scenic painters sitting and rendering, it must be understood that for the backdrop to be of a high artistic quality, the amount of pains for painting in both the positions was equally intense.

This has also been observed by the author as a child, watching V. V. Divkar paint a curtain. Before beginning the painting, Divkar would stare intently at the design sketch for a long time, perhaps to memorize, create and reinforce the mental image of the same.



5.23 Showing Painter Somnath Naik sitting on a backdrop and painting.

Divkar would spread the canvass onto the ground; pin it down with studs or weights at the corners if required just to keep the cloth flat and secured to the ground; make a rough outline of the curtain design on the cloth; keep the paint and other required materials prepared and ready at the side and start painting. He would sit cross-legged or on a bent knee on the canvas while painting. He would often work with great speed. As if all his talent and imagination flowed out from his hand onto the canvas with artistic speed. Until he achieved the right effect with paint, he continued working on the same part, and once satisfied, would move on to another part of the canvass.

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<sup>37</sup> Allana. p. 10.

Once started, the artist did not talk, unless it was to ask for something and fully concentrated on the task at hand. Even if he did talk, his eyes never left the painting. He would only stop and look up after the completion of the decided section of the painted curtain. He would always paint the initial main and final aspects of the painting by himself. Even if the ground was spacious or cramped, in daylight, with or without the proper flooding of light in a closed space, he continued to work in a diligent manner. He most preferred rendering the scenic paintings on the stage of the same theatre where they would subsequently be displayed.

The life of a curtain depends as much on the quality of the materials involved, as on the understanding and use of the materials by the artist.<sup>38</sup> Rosco, Artist's Choice and Benjamin Moore were among the paint brands popular among the scenic painters of the time. Regarding canvasses, tempera on cloth, unsized canvas cloth, thick cloth support for a good quality scenic curtain were required. The paint is fairly resilient but given the amount of handling and usage, with age the layered paint shows flaking.

Expounding on the hand-written notes of V. V. Divkar, he has listed the requirement of materials for the execution of a theatrical curtain, the following pigments have been mentioned: they include White Zinc, Raw Sienna, Burnt Sienna, Umber, Yellow, Victoria Blue, Chinese Blue, etc. It also includes 'saras' or glue which he probably used as the binder. Saras was also used as a sizing material for the unbleached cotton cloth.<sup>39</sup> Sizing the cloth helps it act as a less absorbent canvas thus making the application and manipulation of paint on the surface of the canvas easier. He has also mentioned the quantity of the 'saras' to be bought as 1 ratal.<sup>40</sup>

These colors, which he must have used in various combinations and with a number of application techniques, were a part of his palette while rendering a theatrical backdrop. Divkar typically used either tempera or oil paints to execute his paintings. In case of a tempera medium, he would use powdered pigments with the saras binder, and at times add some kind of oil to it or turpentine as a thinner. J. V. Navlakhi and Company sold turpentine to artists. Located below their offices is the first milestone of Bombay as measured from St. Thomas Cathedral. Sometimes, he would start to paint directly on the canvas or at times, he would draw a rough outline with either pencil or charcoal and then start painting. Typically, he rendered designs for curtains in his sketch book with pencil or watercolors. He preferred using watercolors of the brand Winsor and Newton. Current-day practitioners of scenic painting prefer to use acrylic paints.

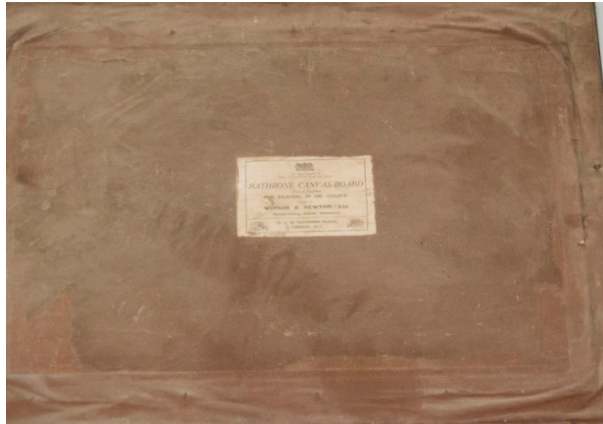
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38 "Drawing." DOA. Vol. 09. p. 217.

39 Phadke Mithila "Restored backdrops get a gloss, bring old era back on stage." TNN. August 13. 2013.

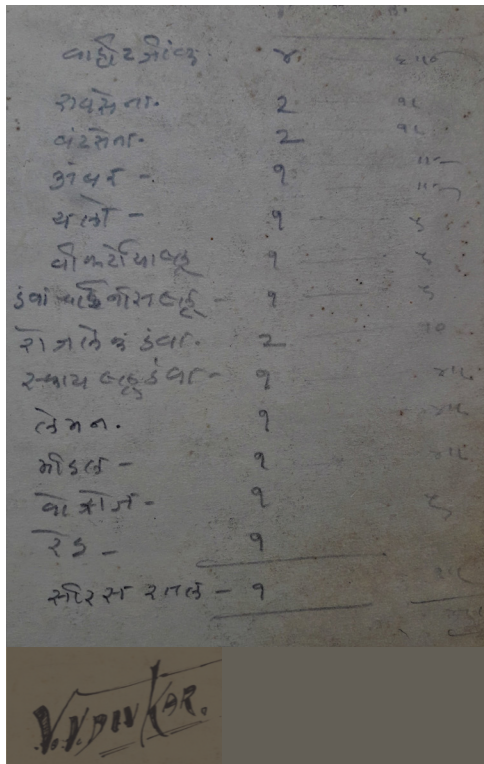
40 Ratal is a unit of measurement in Maharashtra. 1 Ratal is equal to approximately 10 kilos. Another unit of measurement Goni, is approximately equal to 99 kilos.





5.23 Transcribed data on label

Rathbone Canvas Board  
Smooth Surface  
For Painting in Oil Colour  
made by  
Winsor and Newton Ltd.,  
Manufacturing Artists Colourmen  
37 to 40 Rathbone Place  
London



#### Transliterated columns

Nos.	Name of material	qty
1.	White zinc	4
2.	Raw Sienna	2
3.	Burnt Sienna	2
4.	Amber	1
5.	Yellow	1
6.	Victoria blue	1
7.	Chinese blue	1
8.	Rose lac	2
9.	Sky blue	1
10.	Lemon	1
11.	Oil	1
12.	Vocrose	1
13.	Red	1
14.	Saras ratal	1

5.25 Comparative chart of listing of paints, of the scenic artist V. V. Divkar's sketchbook and from the publication Marathi Vishwakosh showing similarities.



The other materials that Divkar used while painting a theatrical curtain included a T-scale, wooden rulers of 6 feet, and brushes ranging from finger-length to the size of one's arm. He would use sable hair brushes for softer delineations of lines and shading, while using brushes with coarse bristles for a flat paint application and to render rough cuts like that of, a tree trunk. See image below.



5.26 Use of a coarse bristles brush to render rough cuts on a tree trunk depicted on a scenic painting. Courtesy: Manoranjan, Pune.



Any kind of paint is generally composed of three components- the pigment, the binder and the carrier. The pigment imparts color, the binder adhesive properties so that the paint adheres to the surface being painted upon, and the carrier essentially imparts fluidity to the paint to be manipulated upon the surface. The carrier eventually dries off, leaving the paint layer composed of the binder and the pigment on the surface. For the sake of painting a theatrical curtain on a large scale, scenic painters would ensure that the binder used would adhere properly with most surfaces. Also, as much as it was possible, they sought to use one pigment color, or similar tones, so as the stage lighting would not greatly affect the perception of the color tones of the painted curtain.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, we can see that the scenic painters were master artists who sought to continuously innovate and refine their work primarily to meet the needs of a drama performance and provide a simulative context to the audience. This resulted in elevation of the practice of painting the scenic backdrops. We have seen how the Marathi Sangeet Natya stimulated the refinement of all art forms involved to the highest level. In order to do so, the scenic painters not only understood and executed their art incorporating Western artistic techniques, but also maintained an indigenous ethos to appeal to the Indian masses. This, according to Allana, was the natural reaction of the artists for being exposed to foreign cultures.<sup>42</sup>

Theatrical scenic painting includes wide-ranging disciplines, encompassing virtually the entire scope of painting techniques. An experienced scenic painter will have skills in landscape and figurative painting, trompe l'oeil, and faux finishing, be versatile in different media such as acrylic, oil, and tempera paint, and be an accomplished gilder, plasterer, and sculptor. The techniques and specialized knowledge of the scenic painter in replicating an image on to a large scale are far different from those of the traditional studio artist. In addition, the scenic painter is often expected to expedite and deliver the curtain within a tight budget. Traditionally, if drawn from the ranks of scenic designers, scenic painters are expected to subordinate their skills to those of the designer. A designer submits scaled paintings, moquette or photographs, perhaps with original research, and are sometimes accompanied by paint samples; the scenic painter is then expected to paint the scenery to match.

We have thus seen the various techniques resulting in artistic backdrops by scenic painters enhancing their dimensionality as well as at the same time creatively conceiving the scenic design. These artists rendered art form having global influences combined with ethnic designs. It is significant to note that most of the artists were multi-talented with no formal education, least of all hardly any technical qualifications. Therefore, would be pertinent to observe their backgrounders to understand what made them such scenic artists.

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<sup>41</sup> Speaking of the then paint industry in India, the first factory for manufacturing paints was Shalimar Paint Color and Varnish Ltd. It was established in 1902 in Gowawariya, near Howrah in Bengal. Till 1919, it was the only such factory manufacturing paint in India. Post 1930s more paint factories came up and after 1945, the paint and varnish making industries modernized themselves. Thus around 1960, 52 large and 200 small factories existed. In 1965, with foreign help and advanced technological methods and equipment, different types of chemical liquids were created. Resultantly, more quantities of binders, carriers and colors became available. Many Companies had tie-up with foreign countries like Asian Paints, Nerolac Ltd., Garware Ltd., Jenson and Nicholson (India) Ltd. However, it is to be observed here that only Camlin produced artist-grade paint.

<sup>42</sup> Allana. p. 10.

## CHAPTER 6 - SCENIC PAINTERS : BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES



6.1 Images of Scenic Painters- Vishnupant Govind Damle, Baburao Mestry, Shaikh Fattal

Over a period of time by sheer dint of efforts and expressions of artistic talent, signature styles of the scenic artists developed. Though similarities in usage of forms, color tones existed, it was the varied use of perspectives by the deployment of the artists hand that brought about versatility in their art. For to be a competent theatrical painter a wide range of skills and talents were required.

We must understand here that the scenic painters referred to, have been perused both, as an individual as well as in relation to each other. Moreover, re-teaming with former colleagues, bringing in new partners to maximize their abilities all these can be observed in this brief backgrounder of the scenic painters.

Therefore, we are narrating briefly the lives of a few scenic painters of the times. The well-known painters of the late 19th and early 20th century were Anandrao and Baburao Mestry, Fattal Shaikh, Vishnupant Govind Damle, Ramesh Sitaram Raoul, Mohan Raoul from Maharashtra, P. S. Kale from Hyderabad Sardar Hari Singh from Punjab and Vasudev Vittal Divkar from Goa. These painters were very skilled and developed the art of scene painting to a great degree of refinement. Artists like Baburao Painter, V.V. Divkar in western India amongst many others who flourished in the first half of the 20th century, have contributed immensely to the world of Theatre Art through backdrops. This in turn further promoted in the field of painting, a new class of Art form.



Born Baburao Krishnarao Mestry in 1890 in Kolhapur, he taught himself to paint and hence derives the surname "Painter." Baburao Painter was the leading scenic painter of stage backdrops in Western India from 1910 to 1916. Along with his cousin Anandrao worked to create sets and scenic curtains for the theatre company Lalitkaladarsha. They painted several notable works for not only the Sangeet Natak troupes but also the Parsi and Gujarati Theatres. After the release of the film Raja Harishchandra they became avid filmgoers.

The theatre company Lalitkaladarsha was established in 1908 by Keshavrao Bhonsle. This company supported and employed the artistic services of Anandrao and Baburao Painter. Anandrao was an expert at painting garden scenes. Another scenic painter Damle, joined the Lalitkaladarsha in 1911.

Further, Anandrao and Baburao ventured into film-making. Baburao was also a film enthusiast and founded the Maharashtra Film Company in 1919. To enable this Baburao borrowed money from Tanibai Kagolkar, a long-time admirer. Movie acting, especially tamasha's were looked down upon in conservative societies like Kolhapur so the studio itself was a living quarter for quite a few artists including leading ladies – Gulab Bai (renamed Kamaladevi) and Anusuya Bai (renamed Sushiladevi). Painter got onboard his old colleagues including Damle and later on V. Shantaram. S. Fattelal, another scenic painter, who came to Bombay with the Mestry brothers was employed by the Maharashtra Film Company.

He enlisted the help of Anandrao to run the company. He also trained V.G. Damle and Sheikh Fattelal, his earliest students, in the art of film production. Baburao and Anandrao bought a movie projector from the Mumbai market, exhibited films, while simultaneously studying the art of movies. Anandrao was busy with assembling a camera for their maiden venture, but his untimely death in 1917 created a vacuum for Baburao. Arriving in the field of cinema, initially as exhibitors they also put in efforts to assemble a very elementary camera. All these creative contributive activities with their foundations embedded as scenic painters, display their versatile talents.

The Maharashtra Film Company became very famous for its silent films in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> In 1923, for his film Sinhgad,<sup>2</sup> he brought about innovation in the realm of set design by discarding painted curtains and installing proper multi-dimensional studio rooms. He also created the effect of fog and moonlight with artificial lighting. Painter disapproved of the Talkies and hence he reverted back to his original vocation of painting and sculpting. Baburao painted beautiful posters for his films which had high standards of Arts suitable for display in a gallery. Indeed, later on when his posters were put up at the J. J. School of Art, Mumbai they were much admired by the then principal, Gladstone Solomon.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Garg. p 32.



6.2 A scene from Baburao Painter's first feature film Sairandhri which received positive critics and commercial acclaim. Source: FTII, Pune



Mestry Brothers efforts to own a theatre and make a film turned out to be successful. Damle was eventually made the managing executive of the Company and proved to be good at it too. Having completed his research and with Damle's help, they finally assembled a movie camera. "Anandrao and Baburao were full of new ideas, but they had to take Damle's help to fructify their ideas."<sup>4</sup>

In the transition phase of theatrical artists moving on to the medium of film, many traditional theatre themes continued to be used in films. With regards to Marathi Sangeet Natak, we see plays like Keechak Vadha by K. P. Khadilkar being made into a film called Sairandhri in 1920. This was Baburao Painter's first film.<sup>5</sup> Sairandhri an episode from the Mahabharata dealt with the slaying of Keechak by Bhima one of the Pandava princes. The play itself was banned because of the perceived criticism of Lord Curzon.

However, the movie itself got positive critics and commercial acclaim spurring Painter on to take more ambitious projects. He wrote his own screenplays and advocated the three-dimensional space rather than stage-painting in the Indian movie. Publicity was not alien to Painter's many talents. In 1921-22, he first distributed programmed booklets complete with photographs and film details.

Baburao was a man of many talents and the first Indian filmmaker to write his own screenplays. He also sketched the costumes, movements, and characters which Eisenstein had described as 'stenographic'. He changed the concept of set designing from painted curtains to solid multi-dimensional lived in spaces. He introduced artificial lighting and understood the importance of publicity. He himself painted tasteful, eye-catching posters of his films.

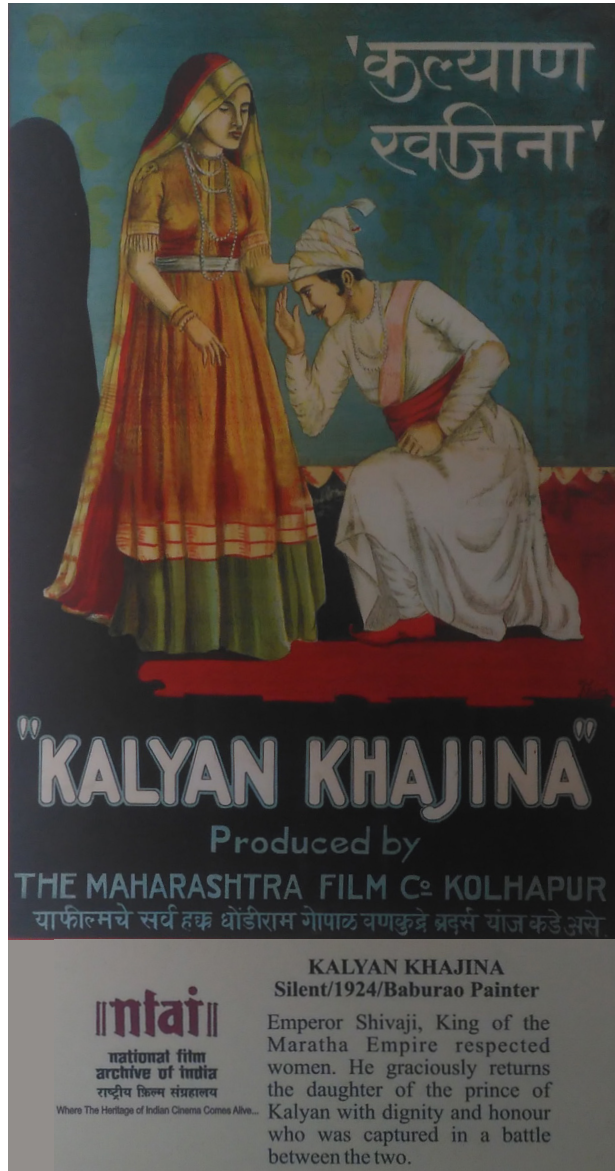
A perfectionist, he insisted upon any number of rehearsals. As Zunzarrao Pawar, a cast member, said 'He would take umpteen rehearsals before actual shooting.... but he was very slow in film-making. That was why we used to get annoyed with him sometimes.' The advent of sound in 1931 did not excite Painter, as, after a few more silent films, the Maharashtra Film Company pulled down its shutters. Baburao was not particularly keen on the talkies for he believed that they would destroy the visual culture so painfully evolved over the years.

He returned to painting and sculpture, his original vocation barring sporadic ventures like remaking Savkari Pash in sound in 1936, Pratibha (1937), one of his few preserved films which is a good illustration of Painter's control over big sets, lighting and crowd scenes and executed on V Shantaram's invitation, was Lokshahir Ramjoshi. (1947) Together, Sinhagad and Kalyan Khajina won a medal at the Wembley Exhibition, London. One newspaper, Daily Express, described the films as full of strangely wistful beauty and acted with extraordinary grace.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Watve p. 4

<sup>5</sup> Garg, p. 31.



In 1923 for the drama Sinhagad, Baburao shifted from painted curtains to multi-dimensional sets. The film was based on Hari Narayan Apte's novel "Gad Aala Pan Sinha Gela". The protagonist Tanaji was a follower of Shivaji and died while capturing Kondhana Fort. While filming Sinhagad, Baburao fell off a horse, the injury causing a lifelong speech defect. The film Savkari Pash failed. However, Painter's artistic masterpiece is considered to be Savkari Pash (1925), dealing with money lending, a problem that blighted the lives of countless illiterate, poor farmers.

Anandrao Painter was one of the leading scenic painters of his time. He worked as a set designer and scenic painter with his cousin Baburao at Lalitkaladarsha. The old Zoroastrian Theatrical Club was established with one of its partners being the painter Anandrao.<sup>6</sup> He lived in Poona, painted the curtains for this Company and became known for his artistic talents.<sup>7</sup>

Anandrao Painter was an artist of a very high caliber. He was an expert in bringing out fantastic effects of color and light in landscapes and thus brought a radical change in stage sets. He was constantly thinking of new ideas and had made many changes in costumes since the era of mythology.

The Painter Brothers curtains have been extensively published in one of the only leading books on scenic curtains- "Painted Sceneries" by Dr. N. Allana. (Page numbers 48-49, 54-55, 82-83)

6.3 Kalyan cha Khajina Film Poster designed by Baburao Painter

6 Gupt. p. 105.

7 Gupt. p. 107.



Vishnupant Govind Damle was born on 14 October 1892 in the village of Pen in Raigad district of Maharashtra, in a well-to-do family for generations which later succumbed to various calamities. Early in life, absorbed theatre influences since Vishnupant's father used to patronize many theatre companies. He also hosted theatre groups visiting Pen during his flourishing days. Vishnupant passed his 5th standard examination at school and sat for the third-grade examination in drawing and painting in 1908. As Vishnupant had an innate flare for drawing he was expected to pass with flying colors. But Vishnupant failed in the examination and his father consoled him stating that his destiny had something else in store for him.

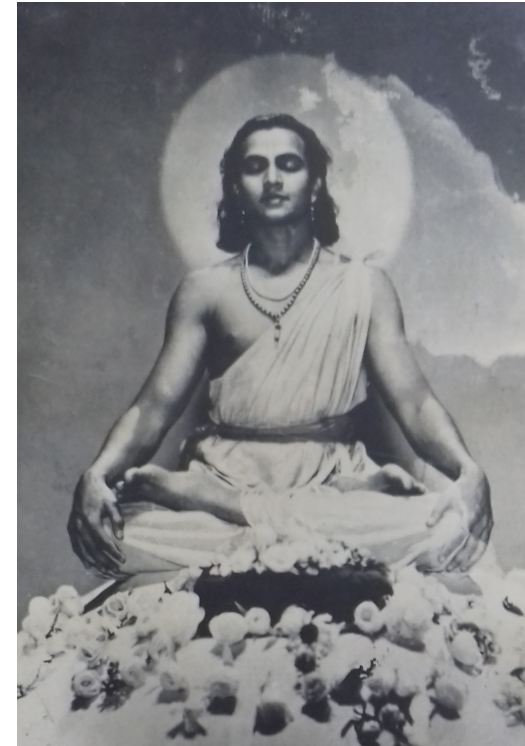
In professional life, Shri Keshav Bedekar, a stage actor in Lalitkaladarsh and Vishnupant's father's friend in Bombay took him under his wings and introduced Vishnupant to the Art Directors Anandrao and Baburao Painter. Damle worshipped his teachers and devoted all his time to learn as much as he could. Damle was offered a very well-paid job to prepare sets for the great stage actor Balgandharva. But he flatly refused this offer to enable to be with his master. Damle refused to take up a permanent job and requested Anandrao to explain his viewpoints to his family.

Vishnupant was destined to become a great artist but was mischievous as a child. However, he agreed to help his father financially by sending him a fixed amount of money every month. Vishnupant met a youth, straightforward, honest and kind-hearted. They became great friends. This youth was Shaikh Fattelal.<sup>8</sup> Damle was a versatile person. He could handle many kinds of jobs. He was a good photographer, electrician, carpenter, and draftsman, while Fattelal was only an artist. They changed many jobs and started their own shop and sold paintings. After a few years, they were offered a job by the film company Anand Vilas to create their stage sets.

Vishnupant Damle was doing very well with the theatre company, earning Rs.80 per month. But he left this well-settled position to go to the aid of his former master, Baburao who called for Damle's help. He also invited Fattelal over from southern India and was whole heartedly committed to the Maharashtra Film Co. But over a period of time Damle left the Maharashtra Film Company and founded the Prabhat Film Company with V. Shantaram, Fattelal and Keshavrao Dhaiber.

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<sup>8</sup> Watve. p. 2



6.4 Images showing Damle and Fattal, sound recordist and art director respectively along with a still from the movie set and poster of Sant Dnyaneshwar. Source: FTII, Pune.



At Prabhat, Damle introduced new technologies in the playback Marathi speaking film. As a director at Prabhat Film Company Damle, Baburao and Fattelal created the "saints" films, such as Sant Tukaram (1936). His last film was Sant Sakhu (1941). The film Ayodyecha Raja, produced by Prabhat Film Company, in 1932 had Damle as its sound recordist. This is the first talkie of the Indian film industry.

Vishnupant Govind Damle (14 October 1892 – 5 July 1945) was an Indian production designer, cinematographer, film director and sound engineer for Marathi films. His 1937 film Sant Tukaram was the first Indian film to be screened at an international film festival. It won a "Special Recommendation" at the 5th Venice International Film Festival. Vishnu Govind Damle was essentially taught the art of scenic painting by Anandrao Painter. Damle and Fattelal worked closely together right until the former's death. Damle founded the Prabhat Film Company in 1928 in which Fattelal was also one of the partners. Here, at Prabhat, Damle initially functioned as the Head of the Sound Department.<sup>9</sup> Then went into film direction and took over the administrative functioning of Prabhat studios as well. Prabhat was indeed a very famous film company with an illustrious record. At Prabhat, Damle was a sound recordist and Fattelal an art director.<sup>10</sup>

Personal artefacts of Damle and Fattelal are at FTII. Both of them donated the entire belongings of the Prabhat Theatre to the Indian Government who started FTII with such a collection. The present-day Film and Television Institute of India at Pune stands on the same grounds where the Prabhat studios once stood. It houses the Prabhat Museum, which houses artefacts and a host of assorted paraphernalia associated with the Prabhat Film Company.<sup>11</sup>

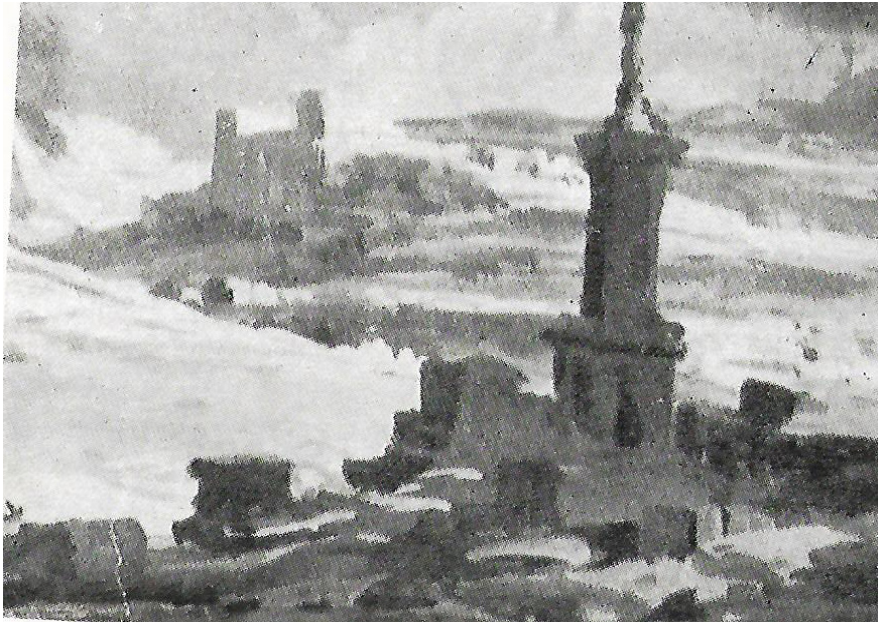


6.4a Posters for Ramshastri and Chimni Pakhare.  
Courtesy: FTII

<sup>9</sup> Garg, p 96.

<sup>10</sup> Watve. Foreword page vii

<sup>11</sup> It is to be recorded here that the University of Chicago Library has a collection of 27 films produced by the Prabhat Film Company between 1932 and 1949.



6.5 Sketches by Fattelal. Source: Watve

The late G.R. Bhide, an assistant to Damle and Fattelal, writing the biography of Painter says that ‘Damle and Fattelal dressed very simply in a white dhoti and a white shirt. They were nice to us, at the same time very strict as far as work was concerned. Damle did not talk much but saw that everyone carried out his orders. He was a man of few words.’ Damle was a straightforward, honest and sincere person and did not hesitate to point out to anything that needed correction.<sup>12</sup>

Another painter P. S. Kale joined the Lalitkaladarsha in 1921. The rendition of the curtain for the play Sharada was by Kale, specifically the one that depicted the house of one of the characters in the play called Kanchanbhat, a poverty-stricken Brahmin. Kale, in designing the sets for the 1922 play Satteche Gulam, used a combination of wood, cloth and painting for the first time.<sup>13</sup> Prominent among the scenic backdrop painters for the Mumbai Marathi Sathiya Sanga was also P. S. Kale.

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<sup>12</sup> Watve. p. 4

<sup>13</sup> Allana. p. 37.



Connectively speaking, the last decade of the nineteenth century saw the birth of Shri Vasudeo Vithal Divkar in an artiste family of Mapusa in Goa. He was withdrawn from school due to his intensive indulgence to sketch nature and birds. Indeed, his father, Shri Vithal Divkar, who specialized in painting houses for Landlords, Military Officers and especially the Portuguese, did influence the said artist in his childhood. At 14, he took to rendering art. He was a self-taught artist who did not receive any formal training in the field of art, but nevertheless was a master of painting, sculpture and woodworking.

Thus, he was absorbed in the field of painting houses, but soon realized that the vistas in Goa were too small for him and at an early age of 16 years arrived in Calcutta – then a mecca for dramatic art. It is here that he diverted himself towards theatrical curtains work and soon gained mastery in it.

In Maharashtra with the K.T. Deshmukh Collection there were curtains. In 1991 the Nehru Centre at Mumbai held an exhibition of the curtains from the K. T. Deshmukh Collection. Subsequently these were purchased by the Honorable Shri Sharad Pawar on behalf of the Maharashtra Government Cultural Department. K. T. Deshmukh was an ardent patron of theatre and theatrical art. Some Kutchi companies at Kalbadevi mortgaged their curtains to K. T. Deshmukh to enable them to carry on with their drama shows. The Kutchi Companies couldn't repay the mortgage so the curtains remained with K. T. Deshmukh.<sup>14</sup> It is in this very collection, the author had observed 3 of V. V. Divkar's Curtains.

V. V. Divkar was an excellent craftsman in wood and had also rendered figurettes as a sculptor. Typically, curtains would be retained by the Drama Company, since they bought it in the first place and exercised their right to do so. Many backdrops have been taken away by visitors while some were gifted. Divkar travelled all over the country, expanded his horizons, created a wide repertoire of backdrops, depended on no one but himself.

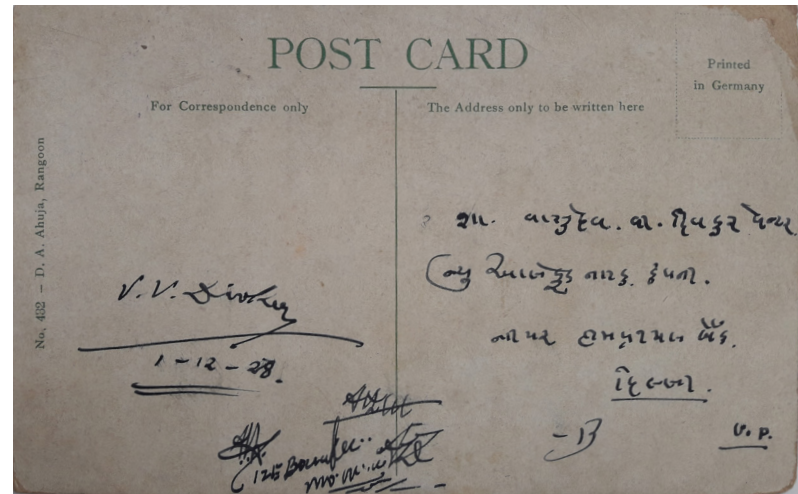
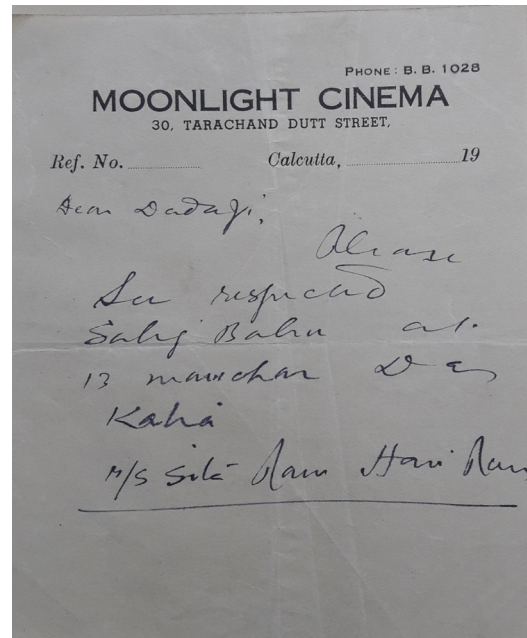
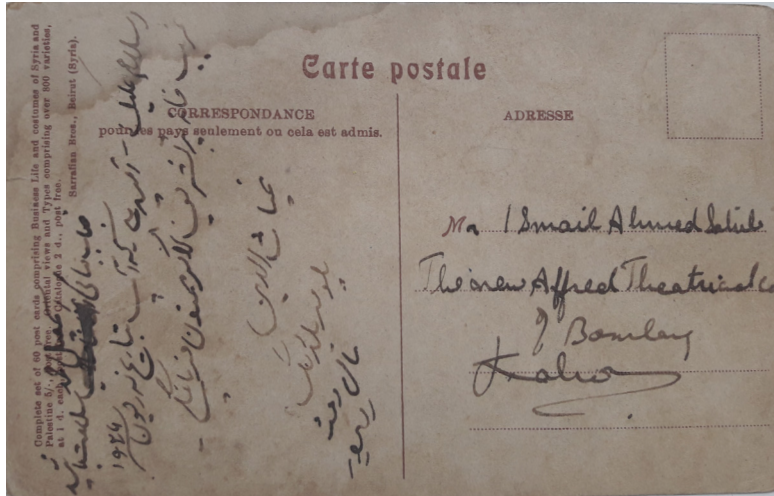
His renderings of Theatrical Backdrops and especially those of the architectural forms were both captivating and a forte in his ever-evolving armory of artistic repertoire. He was deeply influenced by the freedom movement in India and had great respect for Mahatma Gandhi. At the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, commissioned are a few paintings of V.V. Divkar. He was an avid traveler touring the length and breadth of India<sup>15</sup> for his work. He was associated with such theatre companies as New Alfred, Corinthian, Shah Jahan and the Moonlight Theatre in Calcutta. He painted backdrops for film sets as well.

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<sup>14</sup> As per narration of late Shri Shripad Vasudeo Divkar, son of V. V. Divkar. Oral source.

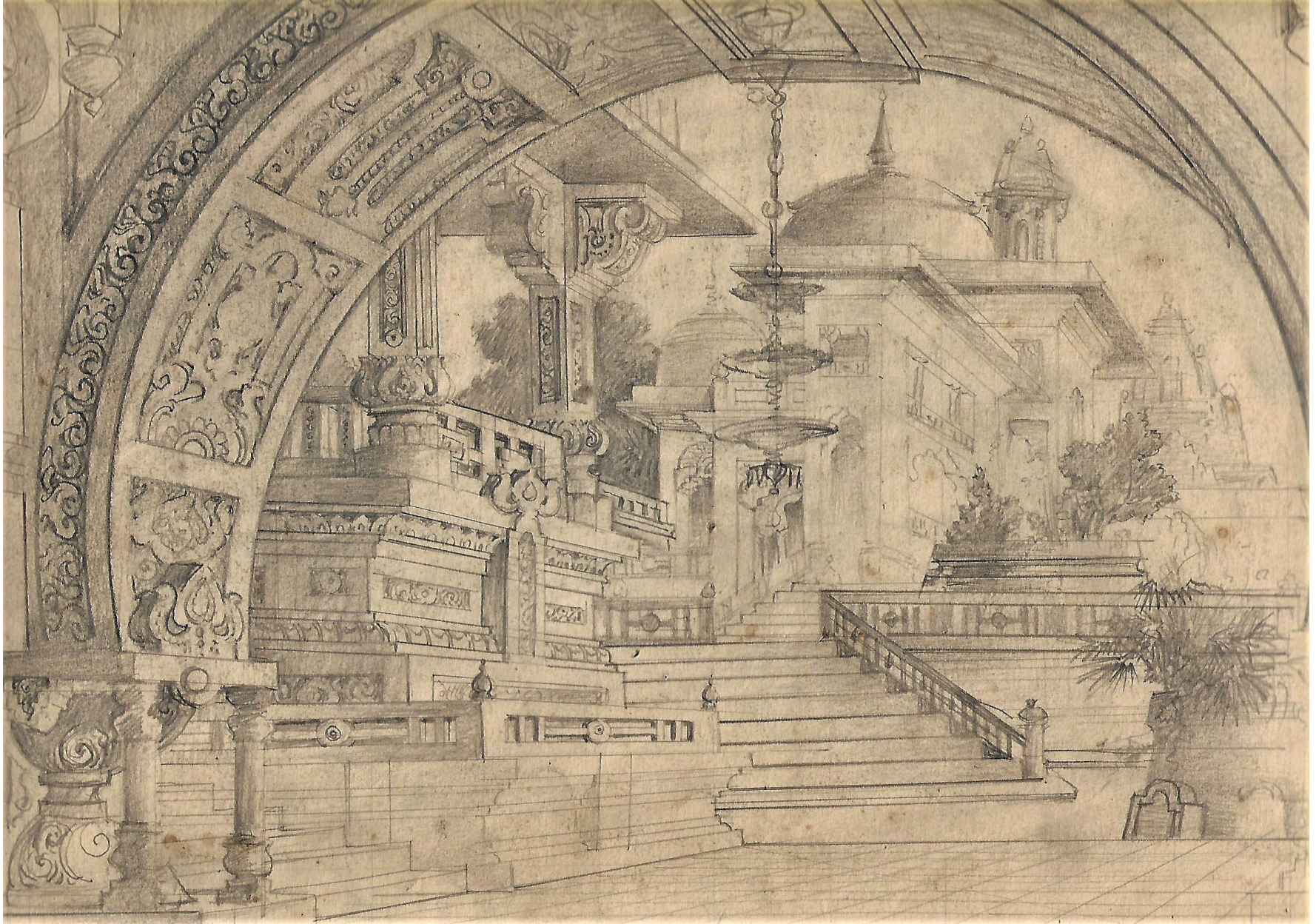
<sup>15</sup> Calcutta, MP, UP, Gujarat, Bangalore, Benares and Madras.

# The Art of Theatrical Backdrops



6.6 Images showing addresses of Theatrical companies the artist V. V. Divkar associated with.





6.9 Proposed sketch of a curtain showing multiple perspectives through the rotunda effect by artist V. V. Divkar.



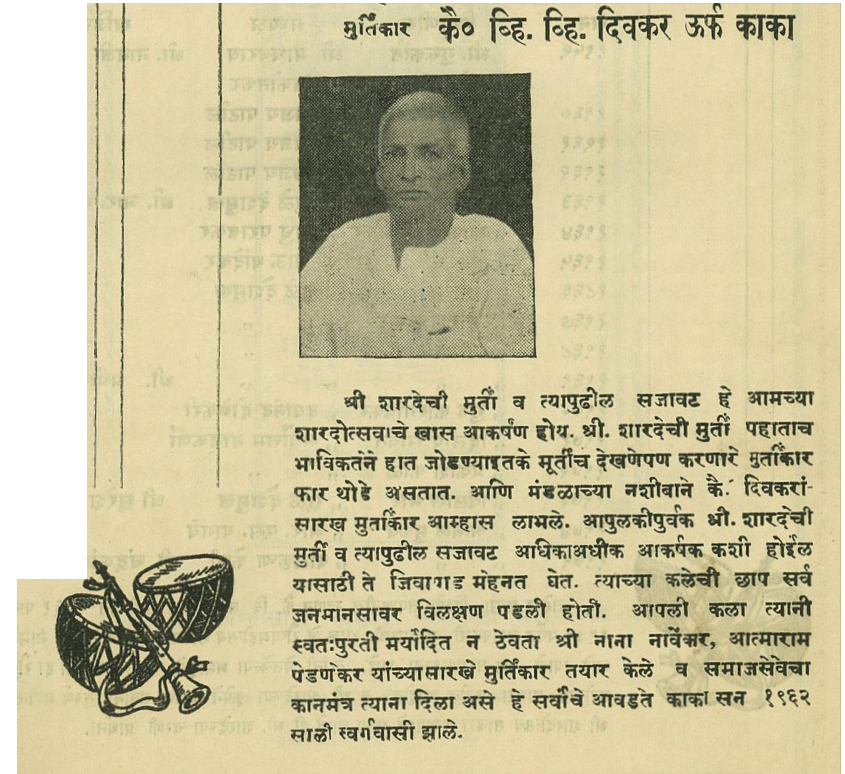


6.8 Proposed sketch of a curtain showing partial Rotunda alongwith outline of a drapery and multiple vanishing points by artist V. V. Divkar.



V. V. Divkar sketched all the time, regardless of whether he received an order or not. V. V. Divkar had created 3 Sketch Books, which shows that he regularly practiced his art and kept abreast of any development in the field of Backdrops so as to adapt accordingly. V. V. Divkar was also good at sculpture. For a social organization in Gavdevi, Mumbai he used to annually design the Devi's statue. This resulted in two resident persons of the locality Shri Nana Narvekar and Shri Atmaram Pednekar becoming his students for the study of Sculpture. In the professional sense he serviced a wide range of clients – e.g. through his supervisor, K. Lall, the magician had Backdrops for his Act of illusions. Some of the organizations and individuals he was closely associated with were organizers of dramas like V. Shantaram, Moonlight Theatre in Calcutta, New Alfred, Corinthian and Shah Jehan Company.

Shri V. V. Divkar was an artist with no formal education in art. However, his practice sketchbooks show a depth of anatomical studies of humans and animals, architectural renderings, landscape sketches and paintings. It shows that his own imagination was vast and deep, being spontaneous and intrinsically oriented towards art. He passed away in Mumbai on July 07, 1962.<sup>16</sup>



6.9 Page from a Souvenir issue mentioning artist V. V. Divkar's prowess as a sculptor. Kindly see transcribed text below.

The statue of Goddess Sharda Devi and its decoration was the highlight of our Shardo Utsav. The moment the visitor glanced at the statue he would react with folded palms. There are very few sculptors who design such attractive statues. We were fortunate enough to have the late Divkar Sculptor. He would put in efforts day and night to make it the best designed statue and its surrounding decoration. His art had an exceptional impression on the surroundings. He did not retain the art for himself but tutored Shri. Nana Nadvekar and Atmaram Pednekar as sculptors. He also trained them to undertake social services. And this favourite personality passed away in 1962.

16 Obituary of V. V. Divkar, "Sanmarg", Calcutta, dated July 07, 1962. See earlier page-80 image 4.18.

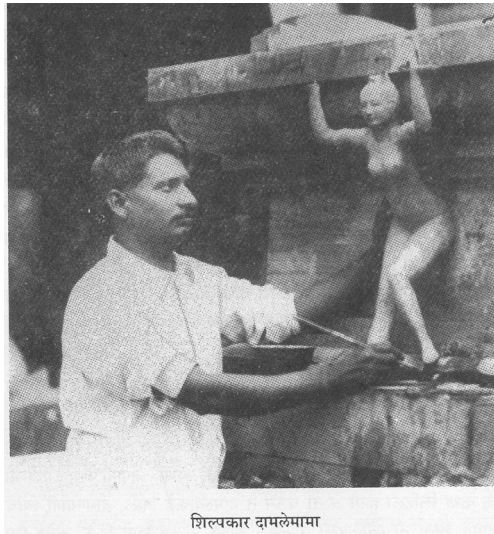


6.10 Painting of a curtain showing a historical street by scenic painter V. V. Divkar, specially commissioned by V. Shantaram for the Shivshambo series.



The septuagenarian artist Ramesh Sitaram Raoul, having a career spanning more than five decades as a veteran painter used to work with his brother, the late Mohan Raoul. Until he retired, he had teamed up with his nephew Lakshman Mohan Raoul. Ramesh's memories are of an era when travelling drama companies kept artists immersed in assignments throughout the year. Learning from stagecraft masters, bonding with the troupes, and creating large, elaborate swathes of art made this an immensely exciting time. Ramesh also went on to paint box-sets, but there is one particular development he fiercely resisted. "Some time ago, there were these terrible flex backdrops," he says. The light would bounce off them, making it difficult for the audience to see the details."<sup>17</sup>

Shri Somnath Naik began his art orientation while assisting the artist Shri V. V. Divkar. He never could afford formal education in art and continued his training under the tutelage of V. V. Divkar. He accepted Divkar as his Guru. Divkar did not actually advocate the Guru-Shishya parampara but would teach one to arrive at a finesse, while he made the student learn and practice on their own. Divkar would highly appreciate any student showing his own initiative. Naik himself did not practice mainstream drawing or fine arts. Somnath Naik passed on the knowledge of his art to his sons, Kiran and Kishore Naik, who continue to create backdrops to this day and are scenic artists in their own right.



6.11 Damle at work on a sculpture.



6.12 Somnath Naik at work on a painting.

Many Scenic artists continue to be a passing reference, usually hearsay, rarely documented. For example, Junnarkar who was influenced by Parsi and Gujarati backdrops. Laxman Painter functioned from Pune and worked in the film industry. He is reported to have rendered posters for the banner of RK Studios of Raj Kapoor.

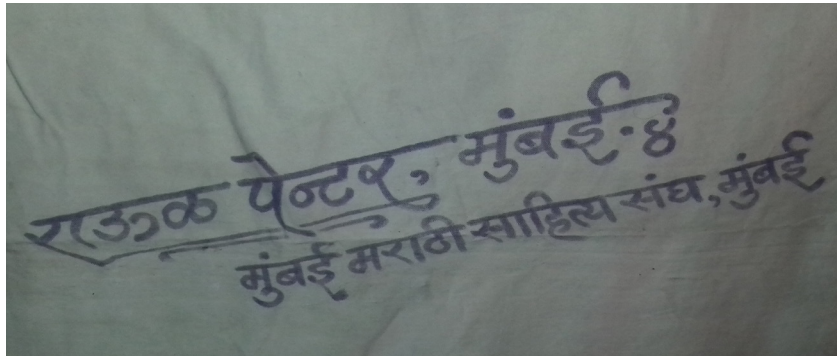
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<sup>17</sup> Phadke Mithila "Restored backdrops get a gloss, bring old era back on stage." TNN. August 13. 2013.





6.13 Scenic curtain painted by artist Mohan Raoul the miniature block below shows the back of the curtain with Mohan Raoul's name. Courtesy: MMSS.







6.14 Scenic painting depicting a typical royal artistic street scene by Somnath Naik. Courtesy: Kala Academy, Goa.

Sardar Hari Singh was a scenic painter from Punjab who executed portraits and worked on Sikh religious themes. He was in close association with other artists of the region and was a re-known painter. It was learnt from his son, a retired engineer, that for long years, Hari Singh worked as a painter for sceneries. Born in Amritsar in 1894 and interested in the art of painting from his young years, Hari Singh attached himself for training early on to Bhai Ram Singh, the greatly gifted but now forgotten architect, builder of such striking edifices as the Senate Hall of Panjab University and the Aitchison College at Lahore, and the Khalsa College at Amritsar.

He was soon hired by the Alfred Theatrical Company. The group enjoyed a high reputation then in the world of theatre, and to work with them was a great opportunity. Recruited in the course of one of the company's performing visits to Amritsar, Hari Singh began travelling with them, painting and learning. There were challenges in designing backdrops and sets for the kind of plays that the Parsi groups performed: "Shahazada Siyawush", "Jahanbaksh and Gulrukhsar", "Bholi Gul", "Neelam Pari" and the like. For there was melodrama in them, and 'spectacular effects': fairy visions, descent from clouds, miraculous appearances, wonderous transformations. But Hari Singh was apparently up to the task.

His place established, he had the opportunity to move in circles that included theatre celebrities such as Master Hussain Baksh, Muhammad Din Lahore Wala, and Dinshaw Irani. He also had the honor of meeting, in the course of his long stay at Calcutta, Rabindranath Tagore who is said to have had words of praise for his painting of the Golden Temple. However, the world of theatre remained his first love. When the time came to move from Alfred, Hari Singh took up work with Madan Theatres and stayed with them for 14 long years, travelling to distant places such as Bombay, Benares, Madras, even Colombo, and working on productions ranging from "Turki Hoor" to "Krishna Sudama."<sup>18</sup> But the glitter of that kind of theatre was beginning to fade, for tastes had started changing, and the cinema had come in.

Consequently, Hari Singh returned to his native city of Amritsar and set up a studio there, producing (till his end in 1970) portraits and landscapes and, yet again, paintings of religious themes. Recognitions and honors came his way and he was even seen as a local celebrity. But in his heart, he probably missed the travelling days of his youth. Travelling was such an integral part of the world of theatre, having dramatique context.

We have to remember that the scale of the theatrical curtains was huge, and as such required excellent mental as well as physical prowess on part of the scenic artist to design and execute the artwork on such a large scale. In the end, to give an example of the artist V.V. Divkar, even after mastering the art of theatrical backdrops, he continuously practiced to create unique designs. Such were the efforts that the scenic curtains extolled from its artists. We are sure similar must have been the dedication of all scenic artists to this discipline of this art of theatrical backdrops.

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<sup>18</sup> Much of the above text on Sardar Hari Singh and Art has been gleamed from Goswamy. B. N., "Painting for the theatre" Spectrum, The Tribune, Sunday, February 01, 2009.





6.15 In the Spectrum Sunday, February 1, 2009 'Art and Soul' by B. N. Goswamy's article on "painting for the theatre."  
Image of scenery showing Temple in the City by artist Hari Singh, 1931

Conclusively speaking, Theatrical Art is yet to be fully discovered. Besides there are other scenic painters of the time to be discovered. Keeping alive the tradition of the scenic painters from the popular times of the Marathi Sangeet Natak up to this day are a handful of artists who are yet scenic painters at least in Maharashtra, like Laxman Raoul; Kiran Naik and Kishore Naik in Goa.

We have seen the kaleidoscopic combination of the various scenic artists background. We have also observed how they became painters and rendered creative art forms according to scenic requirements. With such a vast depth of scenic paintings and myriad forms of artistic depiction there are bound to be grounds for inheritance value. These art values if studied in detail can lead to benefits for posterity. We next look at what are the art values that as well as the fine art forms- scenic backdrops have been handed down to us in perpetuity. These values emanate both from the performing arts.

## CHAPTER 7 : LEGACY

In the latter half of the 19th century, many drama companies were implementing their shows in Bombay and other regions. The Proscenium stage enabled the commercialization of the theatre structure to a great extent, and a variety of backdrops could be depicted at such venues. Herein, we must mention that Parsi Natak Companies were already using painted sceneries but the showed Western influences on their sets. Let us now summarize the varied spectrum of legacies we have inherited from the Marathi Sangeet Natak.

More so, as dramas were written specifically with the Sangeet Natak in mind. Dramas with prose were also produced which, however, were translations of Sanskrit or English plays.<sup>1</sup> Attempts were also made to devise Natak, Sangeet or otherwise, indigenously. However, the resources for such Natak were always embedded in the Puranic traditions of Sanskrit dramaturgy.



7.1 Performance showing how gestures, expressions and one's countenance speaks.  
Courtesy: MMSS

The age of Marathi Sangeet Natak was a period of prime in the life of the Marathi theatre. Among the various forms of Natak or plays in the realm of the Marathi theatre, Sangeet Natak is a classical type of Marathi play based on the Navrasas found in classical Sanskrit literature.

As is said by Shri Shubhash Bhagwat, the Secretary at Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha - “Natkacha samvad lihaychi padhat vegli ahe...Mudra, abhinaya, chehra bolto.”

Dialogue writing for Drama is a different cup of tea..... Gestures, Expressions and one's Countenance speaks. Such being the nature of the Sangeet Natak, it was especially preferred to use painted backdrops as stage settings for the Marathi Sangeet Natak.

<sup>1</sup> BRVI p. 210



Some Natak companies flourished, some stagnated and others closed down. The closures were because of partnership misunderstandings in some cases or the passing away of the doyens of Natak companies in other cases. Also, at times, the dramas by themselves could not be a box office hit possibly because of pecuniary requirements and overall management of the theatre. It is to be noted here that the understanding of Sangeet Natak continued to be on a growing scale with the audience's taste. However, drama companies could not afford to establish Drama theatres; they either obtained on lease some space or carried out performances in temporary areas. This shows that hardly any Natak companies reached a position of affluence and alongwith established their own theatres.

As in Hindi or Bengali drama Companies, Marathi drama companies laid much emphasis on dramatic training where every Natak Mandali had a Guru and or a Teacher on board. Most actors and actresses were on payroll. Female roles were enacted by good-looking male actors. Renowned for playing female roles were Balabhau Jog, Gopalrao Marathe and Bal Gandharva.<sup>2</sup>

With both English and Vernacular plays being performed on a fairly regular scale, there were fervent activities taking place in the world of theatrical business. Partnerships were formed, plays performed in the open air as well as in auditoriums. Actors and to some extent actresses, since mostly male performed female roles, were struggling, striving and sometimes succeeding. With the rising onslaught of Natak, the region in the sphere of Grant Road became a hot bed of cultural activity and in turn gave further impetus to Marathi Sangeet Natak and their Companies. Thus, this activity of the theatre shows that wardrobe and scenery were taken care of, since scenery was also emphasized upon, scenic painters may have been created by this scenario whether English or Indians.

Now the attempt to chart the development of the Marathi theatre has been done in order to see that drama, as a medium of entertainment, has always been popular with the masses. Dramas provided a means to express intellectually challenging topics in a way that can be easily understood and interpreted by the audience.

Kirloskar's production of Sangeet Shakuntala firmly established the foundation of the Marathi Sangeet Natak. As mentioned earlier, on November 05, 1843, the Father of modern Marathi Theatre, Vishnudas Amrit Bhave presented the first Marathi play Sita Swayamvar in the courtyard of the Raja of Sangli, Chintamanrao Patwardhan. Among the earliest observations highlighting the use of Backdrops was an appreciation by Vishnudas Bhave himself of the curtains and the stage scenery of the Grant Road theatre. Kirloskar's contribution to the world of painted scenery was the creation of platforms and usage of three - dimensional property like branches laden with leaves and flowers that emphasized the quintessential presence of a forest scenario, thereby highlighting the three - dimensional effect. These early developments later on became a regular practice of depictions in Sangeet Natak. From 1873, Kirloskar Natak Mandali initiated the usage of painted curtains.

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<sup>2</sup> Phadke Mithila, "Restored backdrops get a gloss, bring old era back on stage." TNN. August 13. 2013. BRVI. p. 211.



7.2 Depiction of a modern street scene as a design for a backup reflecting art deco structures. Sketch by V. V. Divkar.



Very often it is mentioned that there are limited subjects depicted on curtains which are held as in stock by the Natak Companies. This version reflects dilutions on our part. When we have right from the 18th century till date, a wide array of backdrops rendered with inculcation of innovation to that art, we need to undertake in - depth studies on this vast form of art. Of course one can understand that one of the major drawbacks to such attempts is the paucity of available source material for study - both in terms of literary sources like manuscripts and books as well as the actual existence in a contemporaneous sense of theatrical backdrops.

However, it is to be noted that all through the 19th and 20th centuries, there was fervent activity and development in the painting of the backdrops. Innovation, application of technical and artistic skills, continued to render backdrops in spite of the arrival of the moving image or film. Utilizing the inventions and discoveries of their times, evolving a multi-cultural art form amalgamating and crossing national and international borders. Such has been the versatile contribution to the field of art through backdrops by the scenic painters. All these factors converge pointedly to expose the above mentioned lacunae of limitation of subjects depicted on curtains. One can only emphasize the need to bring about refreshing historical analysis of this art form.



7.3 Painting by Emilio Vasarri from the Salon De Paris, depicting scenic backdrops probably from the late 19th, early 20th century. From the post card collection of V. V. Divkar

The theatrical backdrop or curtain was looked upon as a part of a large ensemble on stage. This itself was a part of an even larger system of actors, music, costumes and storyline. The curtain was largely looked upon as an ornamental part of the stage setting. In the scheme of things, aspects relating to the live dramatic performance took precedence over the background stage setting and the curtains. Therefore, though much appreciated, the dynamism, talent and intelligence required on part of the scenic artist in order to create the curtains was never exactly brought in the limelight.

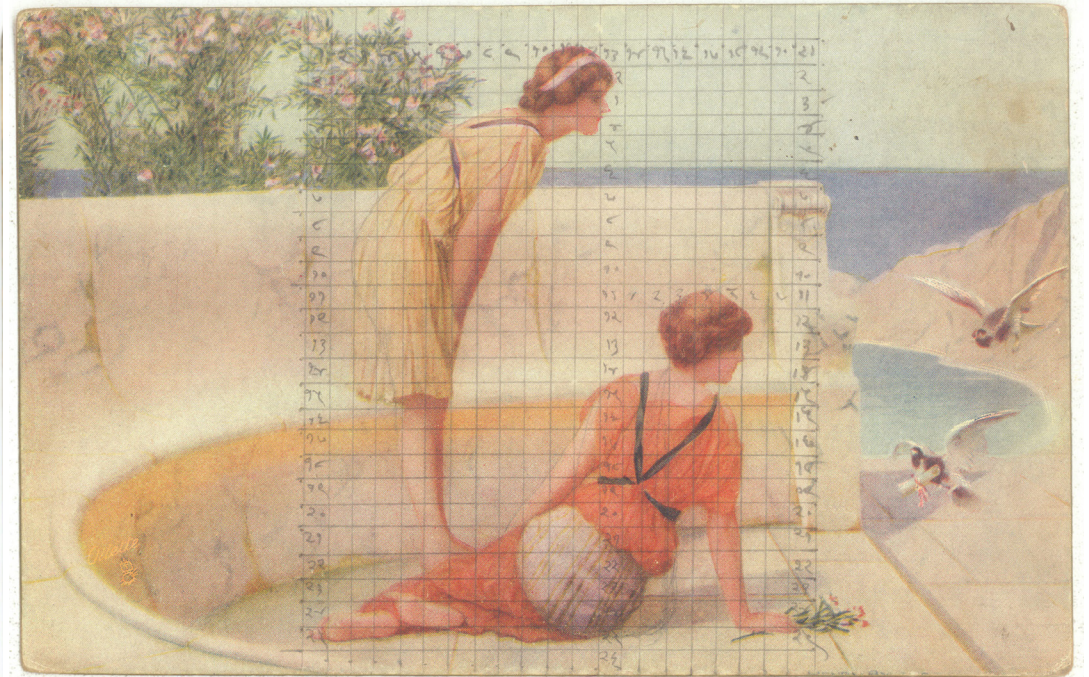
While on most visits to Natak Companies, the curtain scenario is very much as in above, both in Pune and Mumbai. Old theatre companies like Kirloskar Natak Mandali and Maharashtra Natak Mandali in Pune have stopped existing since a very long time. However, there are still a few theatres that carry on the tradition of the Marathi Sangeet Natak and the Marathi theatre which yet retain a stock of curtains. One such example is of the Bharat Natya Sanshodhan Mandal, who continue to hold a vast depository of data. This should be perused and sorted out to glean if additional information can be found on the subject of theatrical backdrops.

It was especially difficult to physically locate the curtains as well. Since many of the theatre companies tend to discard the massive curtains that are not in use anymore. One such case in point is of the Bal Gandharva Sabhagruha in Pune. During the renovation of this theatre roughly three years back, the scenic curtains in their stock were entirely discarded. The offices only retained the old photographs of these curtains. If the requirement for curtains arises, it is rented from a company called Manoranjan that provides stage props.

There is a serious lacunae on the research and documentation front. Combined with the lack of business management in theatrical areas, this lacunae has resulted in what we feel could be described as myopic perspectives. Almost all Natak Companies had a similar set of curtains in stock. A jungle view, garden, royal palace, prison, fort and socio - religious depictions. More interestingly, nowadays they share their limited cache of curtains with other organizations. Fine indeed, as long as the commercial camaraderie and artistic need of Nataks are sufficed. But were the subject of such curtains the beginning and the end of backdrop scenarios? Certainly not. A vast array of curtains were rendered as backdrops. This needs to be further studied and documented. Most Natak companies today emphatically state what we have well researched. That hardly any curtains are left, no more scenic painters are in existence. Hence, only a few subjects are drawn due to pecuniary constraints and dramaturgic requirements. Thus an overall opaque picture has been spread in the Natak industry as far as curtains are concerned. This is precisely what we meant by myopic views.

References have been painstakingly sieved from the larger body of reference data when it pointedly displays any interaction on the subject of curtains and scenic painters. However narrow as it may seem in current times, the interest in such scenic curtains has deepened, and the discipline of theatrical scenic painting is coming to be recognized as an art form in its own right. There is thus an immense urgency today to identify, index, collate and perennially research these backdrop curtains for their artistic historicity. There exists a dire need to initiate due efforts with immediate effect, or else invaluable Theatrical Art and its dimensional treasure shall be a profound loss to posterity.

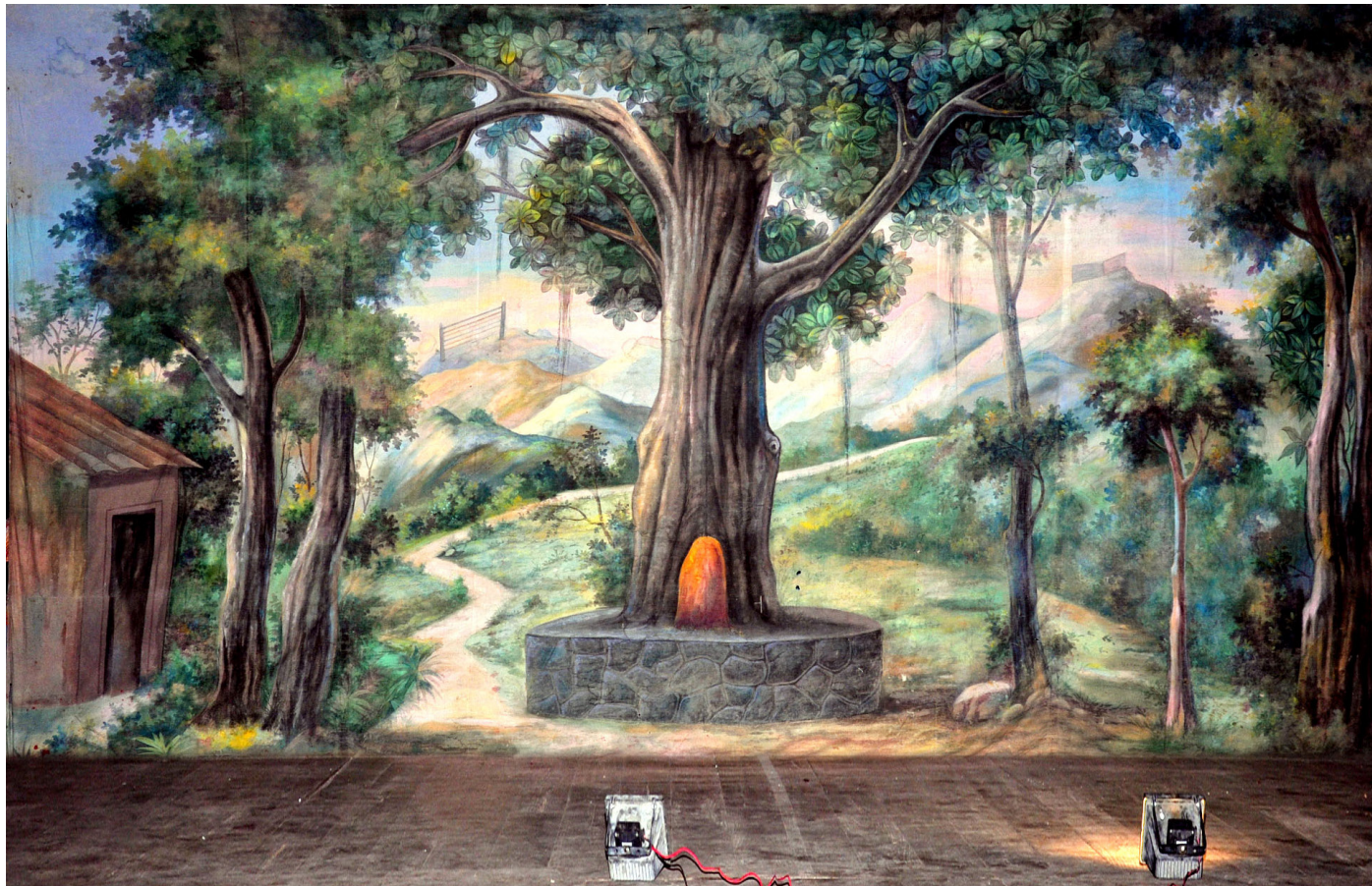




7.4 Postcards as a source of practicing squaring techniques for scenic curtains.  
Postcard collection of artist V. V. Divkar



Manoranjana continues to retain and rent out their stock of scenic curtains to theatre companies, among other stage props and equipment, as and when needed. The proprietor of Manoranjana, Shri Mohan Kulkarni, says that theatrical curtains were indeed very popular among the people in the past. Painted curtains of famous scenic artists commanded their own form of respect in the form of applause by the audience every time the curtain was displayed before the beginning of plays. One such famous scenic artist was P.S. Kale, whose scenic art was highly appreciated among the masses. Shri Shubhash Bhagwat says of the theatrical curtains that - "The cotton backdrops are so beautiful that people would go home, remembering them more than the acting...The restoration of the theatrical curtains has become our passion. We want more people, especially the youth, to discover this bit of theatre history."<sup>3</sup>



7.5 Scenic curtain showing jungle scene, the splash of orange on the stone sculpture at the tree base indicates worship of religious object highlighted by stage floodlights. Courtesy: Manoranjana, Pune.

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<sup>3</sup> Allana, p. 11.



Even with the advent of Cinema, first of the Silent Movies and later on the Talkies, Backdrops continued to be initially used to enhance locations, often employed to depict monuments, palaces, temples and scenic landscapes. According to Dr. Allana - “It was often difficult to distinguish a three - dimensional setting from a painted one.”<sup>4</sup> With the advent of modern drama, such artistic backdrops were relegated to the backstage attic leading to deterioration.

In today's times, digital technology has replaced the use of the hand-painted backdrop. Today a vast array of tools of technology are available to us like CorelDraw, Adobe Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator, Page Maker, SketchUp etc. and high-end digitization scanners. Yet graphic artists find it challenging to create three - dimensional splendor. However, our ancestral artists like the Mestry Brothers, Anandrao and Baburao, V. V. Divkar, P. S. Kale, Mohan Raoul, Sardar Hari Singh and many other artists, some of who are yet to be discovered, seemed to have excelled at Theatrical Backdrop rendering with splendid three - dimensional effect.

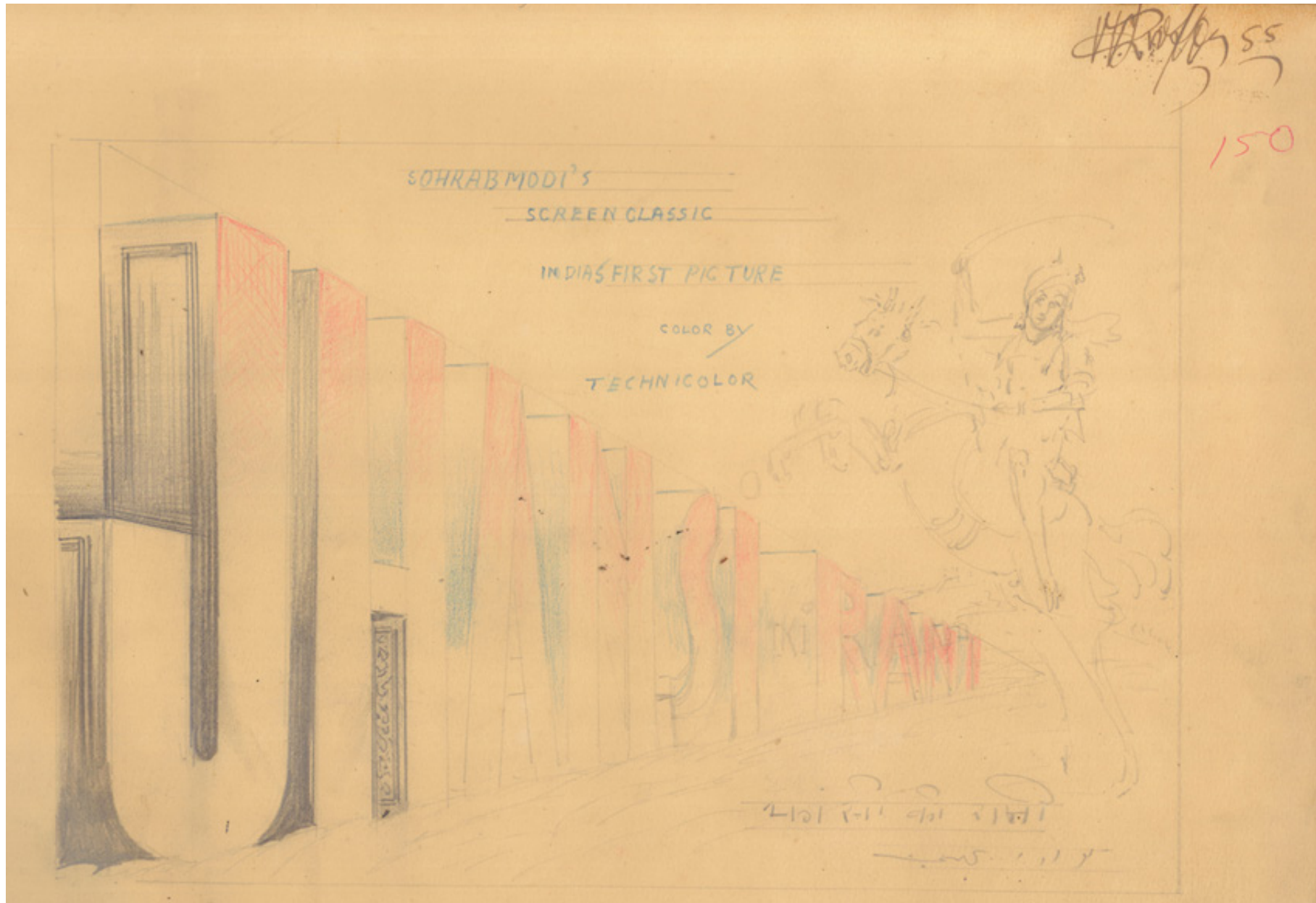
Observing the scenic curtains, just as in the present day when we determine the final size of a digital printout, we are warned that a change in size may cause changes in the visuals like blurring or sharpness. Similarly, the rendering of the backdrops required at times modifications according to their sizes, which could range from 15 ft x 25 ft to 15 ft x 40 ft. Since not all theatre auditoriums and their stages were of the same size. They simply varied and the scenic painter had to skillfully adapt to it on his own.

As custodians of this traditional art, furthering the cause of such culture, we can mention the case of the Government of Goa. While promoting rural and urban dramatic projects the Government of Goa helps to keep active the demand for generation of theatrical curtains. Traditional Dramas in Goa are hosted after the rains subside, around September or October, and continue right through the summer months until May. Various jatras or fairs are held in villages and small towns according to the entertainment nomenclature or religious festivities. The Government of Goa facilitates the allocation of land and funds to set up stage auditoriums and prepare backdrops. Kishore Naik, son of the scenic painter Somnath Naik, is very actively involved in carrying on the tradition of scenic curtains locally in Goa for drama companies and socio-religious institutions for their events. Over a period of time, his curtains have also graced foreign shores like Kuwait, Saudi, US and UK.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Allana p. 11

<sup>5</sup> Source: oral testimonies from the family members of the late Somnath Naik in Goa, especially Kiran Naik also an Artist in Goa.



7.6 With the arrival of the film industry sketch by artist V.V. Divkar depicting graphic for a film poster of “Jhansi Ki Rani.”



Scenic painters were absorbed with multiple perspectives. Such multi-axel depth enabled them to bring around multi-dimensional artistic projections resulting in a three - dimensional style. Just as the vanishing point has its stretches beyond the realm of geometry, so were scenic painters pencil sketches and scenic backdrops heralding the rendered art to geometrical infinity. Careful recording of the scenic painter's name has to be carried out as reflected on the curtain. In this manner proper credibility can be attributed to the scenic artists and their works. Drawings and practice sketch books revealed the extent of practice and diligent effort on part of the scenic painter to achieve ultimate finesse to their artwork. Despite the lack of original source material for the study of the theatrical curtains, efforts are being made time and again to bring to the forefront this art form.

However, we must remember that the theatrical backdrops are artistic works enveloped in their own right. Hand-painted on a large canvas format by the scenic artist having honed his art and craft with practice for over many years. Masters of the art of scenic painting, their legacy of theatrical backdrops left behind for posterity are a primary and irreplaceable source of their knowledge along with a living testament to their artistic genius. It is imperative for the succeeding generations to make an attempt to understand the Art of theatrical backdrops in order to further compile its definitive undiscovered art history for the benefit of posterity. Therefore, in lieu of the current situation where theatrical art is soon vanishing, there exists a dire need to document, study and preserve the theatrical curtains that survive, otherwise there stands a very real chance of this art form and its methodology being lost forever. This project proposal hence intended to research such artists and their art of painting theatrical curtains. Further on to highlight the contribution of such artists not only to drama and the stage but also to the realm of art.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Abhijnanashakuntalam	Sanskrit play by ancient Indian playwright Kalidasa
Acrylic	Pigments with an acrylic binder
Ajab Nyaya Vartulacha	Adaptation of Brecht's play 'Caucasian Chalk Circle' in Marathi
Amphitheatre	Open-air theatre
Andhalyanchi Shala	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Vartak
Ankiya Naat	Folk theatre tradition from Assam
Arati	Hindu religious ritual or worship
Ashirwad	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Rangnekar
Bebandshahi	A Marathi play
Bhaubandhaki	A Marathi play
Bhavai	Folk theatre tradition from Gujarat
Bhawana	Folk theatre tradition from Assam
Bhrantikrut Chamatkar	Play by Marathi playwright Ramchandra Pradhan
Bohada	Folk theatre tradition from Maharashtra
Chitrangada	Bengali play by Rabindranath Tagore
Dakghar	Bengali play by Rabindranath Tagore
Dashavatara	Folk theatre tradition from Maharashtra
Devajine Karuna Keli	Adaptation of Brecht's play 'The Good Woman of Setzuan' in Marathi
Distemper	Water-based wall paint
Drop scene	The first curtain or curtain closest to the audience; lowered at the beginning and end of the play or during the play to allow for changing the stage setting
Ekach Pyala	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Ram Ganesh Gadkari
False finishing	Depiction of a surface finish or texture created through artistic or craft means
Figurative painting	Representational art depicting source objects from real life
Folk theatre	Folk drama, generally rural theatre based on folk traditions, local history and mythology

Ghasiram Kotwal	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar
Gilding	The process of applying gold leaf or gold paint
Gondhal	Folk theatre tradition from Maharashtra
Guptamanjusha	A Marathi Sangeet Natak by Marathi playwright Annasaheb Kirloskar
Haach Mulacha Baap	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Mama Warerkar
Harishchandra	Play by Marathi playwright Sokar Bapuji Trilokekar
In-situ	In the original location
Jatra	Folk theatre tradition from Bengal
Kalyanam Raghuramaiah	Famous stage actor from South India
Kanchangadhchi Mohana	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play by the Marathi playwright Khadilkar
Kathakali	Folk theatre tradition from Kerala
Keechakvadha	A Marathi play
Keertan	Folk theatre tradition from Maharashtra
Khayal	Form of musical arrangement in Hindustani classical music
Kuttiyattam	Folk theatre tradition from Kerala
Lalit	Folk theatre tradition from Maharashtra
Landscape painting	The depiction of natural scenery in Fine Arts
Mahabhasya	Sanskrit treatise on grammar by Patanjali from ancient India
Mahaviracharita	Sanskrit play by ancient Indian playwright Bhavabhuti
Malatimadhava	Sanskrit play by ancient Indian playwright Bhavabhuti
Malavikagnimitram	Sanskrit play by ancient Indian playwright Kalidasa
Manapman	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play
Marathi Natya Sangeet	Popular form of Marathi theatre music advocating Ragas prevalent during the 19th and 20th centuries
Mativikar	A Marathi Sangeet Natak by Marathi playwright Annasaheb Kirloskar
Mookanayak	A Marathi Sangeet Natak by Marathi playwright Annasaheb Kirloskar shown as lead actor
Mrichhakatika	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play
Nala Damayanti	Play by Marathi playwright Sokar Bapuji Trilokekar



Naman	Sanskrit term for inaugural prayer song in a play
Natak Companies	Theatre or Drama Companies
Natyashastra	Sanskrit treatise on dramaturgy by Bharatmuni from ancient India
Oil paints	Pigments with an oil binder
Plastering	Cover a wall, ceiling, or other structure with plaster
Premasanyasa	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Ram Ganesh Gadkari
Premshodhan	A Marathi Sangeet Natak by Marathi playwright Annasaheb Kirloskar
Puppetry	Puppet play, theatre or performance involving the manipulation of puppets by a puppeteer
Raja	Bengali play by Rabindranath Tagore
Rakshasi Mahatwakansh	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Waman Gopal Joshi
Raktakarabi	Bengali play by Rabindranath Tagore
Ram Rajya Viyog	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play
Ramavatary Khel	Plays by Marathi playwright Vishnudas Bhave based on the Ramayana
Ras Lila	Folk theatre tradition originating in Uttar Pradesh
Realism	Realism, in the arts, the accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life
Retouching	Improve or repair a painting, photograph, or other image by making slight additions or alterations
Samaja	Sanskrit term for a form of dramatic entertainment in ancient India
Sangeet Saubhadra	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play by Marathi playwright Annasaheb Kirloskar
Sant Sakhu	A devotional Marathi play
Sant Tukaram	A devotional Marathi play
Sanyasacha Sansar	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Mama Warerkar
Saras	A type of animal glue derived typically from bovine animals
Satteche Gulam	A Marathi play
Saubhadra	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play by Marathi playwright Annasaheb Kirloskar
Sawai Madhavraochya Mrityu	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play by the Marathi playwright Khadilkar
Sculpting	Create or represent something by carving, casting, or other shaping techniques

Shakuntala	Adaptation of Kalidasa's play 'Shakuntala' in Marathi
Shamiana	A marquee
Sharada	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play by Marathi playwright Deval
Sinhgad	A silent film in Marathi produced by the Maharashtra Film Company
Sita Swayamvar	First Sangeet Natak by Marathi playwright Vishnudas Bhave
Sokar Bapuji Trilokekar	Marathi playwright who developed an early form of Marathi Sangeet Natak
Sutradhar	Sanskrit term for manager of the play
Swang-Nautanki	Folk theatre tradition from Rajasthan and other parts of North and Central India
Swayamvar	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play
Tamasha	Folk theatre tradition from Maharashtra
Tara	Play by Marathi playwright Vishnu Moreswar Mahajani
Taramandal	A Marathi play
Teen Paishacha Tamasha	Adaptation of Brecht's play 'The Three-penny Opera' in Marathi
Theatron	Greek term referring to play-house, stage and audience
Theatrum	Latin term referring to play-house, stage and audience
Thumri	Form of musical arrangement in Hindustani classical music
Toh Mee Nhavech	A Marathi play by Marathi playwright Rangnekar
Tratika	Adaptation of the English play 'Taming of the Shrew' in Marathi
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
Utsava	Sanskrit term for a form of dramatic entertainment in ancient India
Uttar Ramacharita	Sanskrit play by ancient Indian playwright Bhavabhuti
Vasudev	Folk theatre tradition from Maharashtra
Veertanaya	A Marathi Sangeet Natak play
Vidushak	Sanskrit term for court jester
Vidyaharan	A Marathi Sangeet Natak by the Marathi playwright Khadilkar
Vikramurvashiya	Sanskrit play by ancient Indian playwright Kalidasa
Yakshagana	Folk theatre tradition from Karnataka
Zunjarrao	Adaptation of the English play 'Othello' in Marathi



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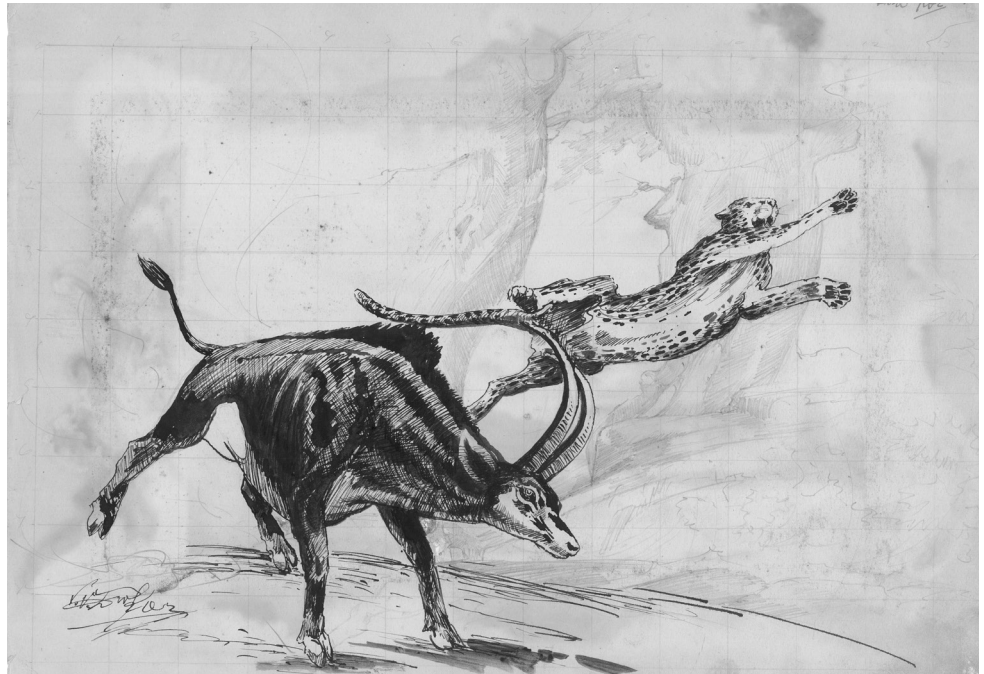
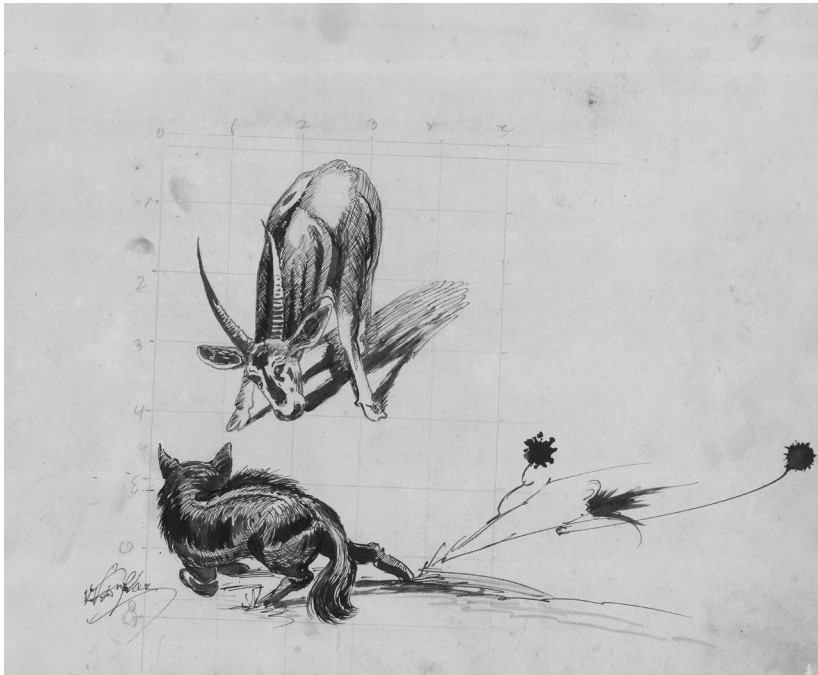
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## APENDIX 1: VIVID USAGE OF SQUARING TECHNIQUE WITH GRID LINES BY V. V. DIVKAR

The squaring technique has been in applied drawing since a long time. Using the grid lines each square can be denoted to reflect a particular part of the object to the drawn. This squaring technique enables to emphasize on the depth of distance and details of angular variations. In life forms, human or animal, it further enables rendering of emotional content like anger, pleasure, grief, fear, etc. The following graphic sketch highlights what has been mentioned above. These sketches also provide enhanced compliments to the image on page 101.



## APENDIX 2: STAGES LEADING TO THE FORMATION OF A PAINTING 'AKBAR AT THE TEMPLE' BY V. V. DIVKAR



Sketch 1- By means of the squaring technique using the grid lines evolutionizing the characters to be depicted.



Sketch 2- Practice sketches to depict historically correct countenances.



Sketch 2

Sketch 3- finalization with pencil sketch of the overall design.





Sketch 4-  
Finished  
painting  
showing  
Rotunda effect.

## APENDIX 3: PROPOSED STRUCTURE FOR DOCUMENTATION OF THEATRICAL BACKDROPS

Structure for documentation of Theatrical Backdrops.

Can be utilized to record, document and archive.

### 1. Identification

- a. Documentation No.:
- b. Documented by:
- c. Date:
- d. Name of the Curtain: (with source)
- e. Common name/ Associative name:
- f. Name of the Artist: (with source)
- g. Identification of Sources: (Archives/ Oral by Expert/ Others)
- h. Date of Painting: (with source)
- i. Time taken to painting the complete Curtain:

### 2. Location

- a. Owner(s):
- b. Current Location of the curtain:
  - Address
  - City
  - Pin – code(Attach a Location Map if necessary)
- c. Setting where located, within the address:
- d. Previous owner:
- e. Nature of Access:
- f. Mode of Display: (current and past)



### 3. Description

#### a. Dimensions:

Length

Breadth

Diagonal

Thickness of Backdrop (with and without paint layer)

#### b. Method of Measurement:

#### c. Description:

- Design/ layout

- Material of Backdrop and Paint

- Setting

- Boundaries and Lining

- Brushstrokes

#### d. Description as per other sources:

### 4. Documentation

#### a. Where documented

b. Moved?    Yes    No

c. If yes, Original address:

d. Existing sketches, rough drawings of the curtain:

e. Visible Features:

f. Hidden Features: (by infra-red, scanning etc.)

### 5. Photographs

a. Photographs: (current)

b. Photographs: (earlier)

c. Photographs: (during documentation)

## 6. Observation and Analysis

- a. Theme of the Curtain:
- b. Subject matter:
- c. Style of Painting:
- d. School of Art:
- e. Influences
- f. Composition:
- g. Integrity:
- h. Damage:

## 7. Significance

- a. History of the Curtain and its use:  
(Affiliation to a theatrical company,  
commissioning body/ individual, etc.)
- b. References of Usage:  
(Archival documents, experts, magazines, and  
others)
- c. Significance of the Curtain: (Cultural, Social,  
Historic etc.)
- d. Theatres used in:
- e. Plays/ Natyasangeet etc. used for:

## 8. Miscellany

- a. References in Media:  
(Newspapers, Blogs, T. V., Films, Websites etc.)
- b. Comments:



## APENDIX 4: THEATRICAL BACKDROPS COLLECTIONS

### 1. Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangha, Mumbai

In Mumbai, MMSS has an enviable collection of curtains. Some of them have been specifically ordered for a drama but most of the curtains nowadays hold multi-utility for a number of dramas.



01. Royal Wada- 3D



02. Gaav Rasta I



03. Gaav Rasta II

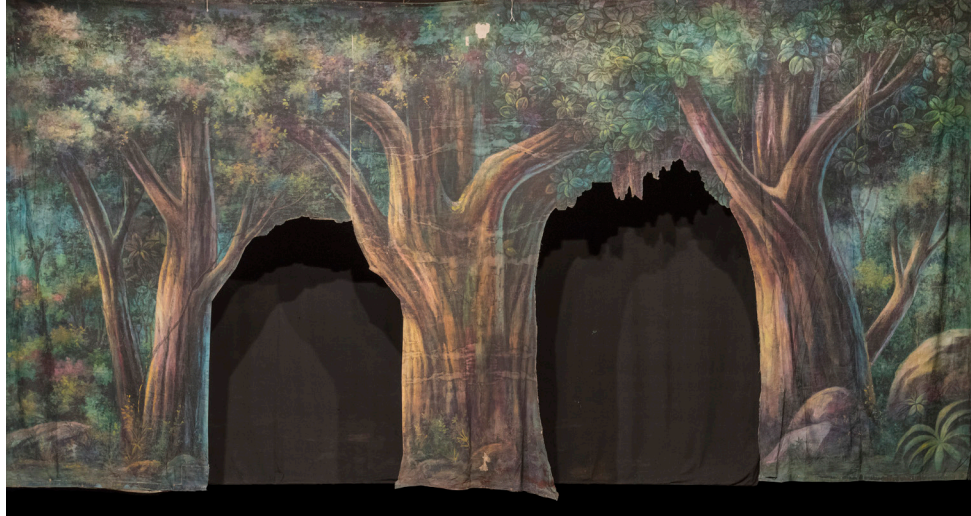


04. Royal Palace Inner Room I





05. Jungle Track I



06. Cut Jungle



07. Royal Palace Inner Room II



08. Net Curtain Jungle





09. Cow Scene- Gokul, Swayamwar



10. Net Curtain Jungle with Cow Scene



11. Village House Inner Hall



12. Royal Garden



## The Art of Theatrical Backdrops



13. Village Way.



14. Night Scene.



15. Jungle View.



16. Naveen Town Road





17. Palace Inner View



18. Mountain View



19. Bala House-Saswad, Honajibala.



20. Shamiyana



## The Art of Theatrical Backdrops



21. Jail, Bebandshahi



22. Fort Exteriors



23. Cut Jungle Cave

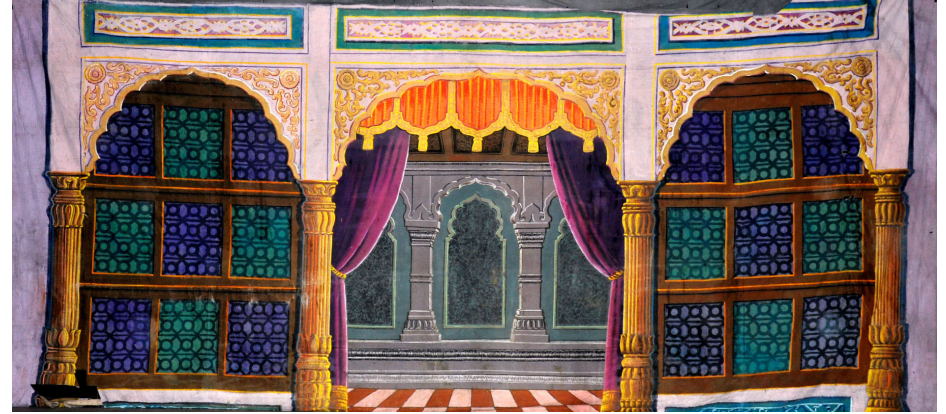


## 2. Theatrical Backdrops Collection of Manoranjan, Pune

Manoranjan, Pune has its own collection of curtains. It also shares, gives on lease curtains to other theatre companies. The curtains are kept in stock covering a wide range of subjects.



1. Unnamed



2. Chota Mahal Juna



3. Deul ghat



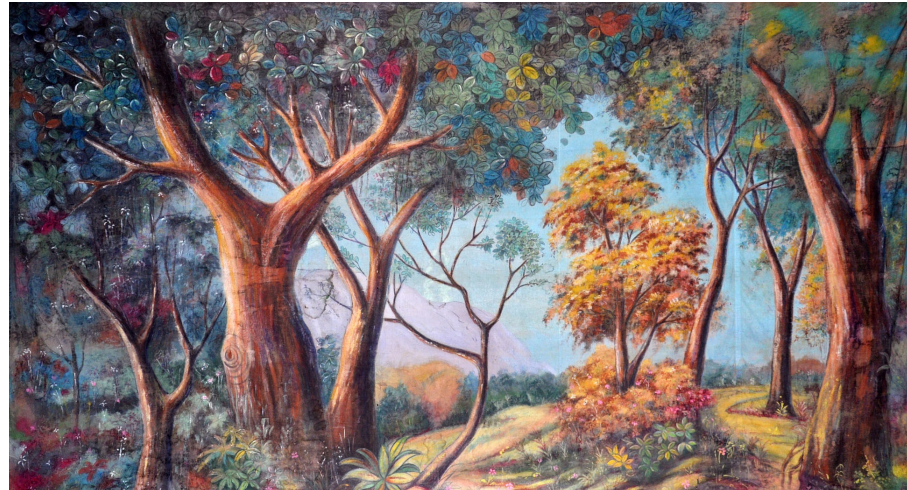
4. Gao Rasta Juna



The Art of Theatrical Backdrops



5. Garden Juna Changla



6. Jangal Juna



7. Jangal Maroti



8. Juna Jangal Kharab





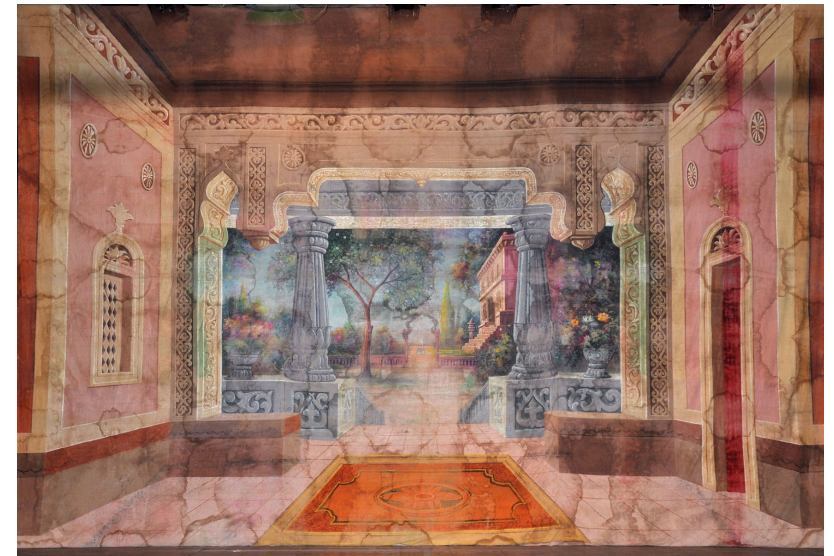
9. Karkhana Chota



10. Mahal Juna Bara

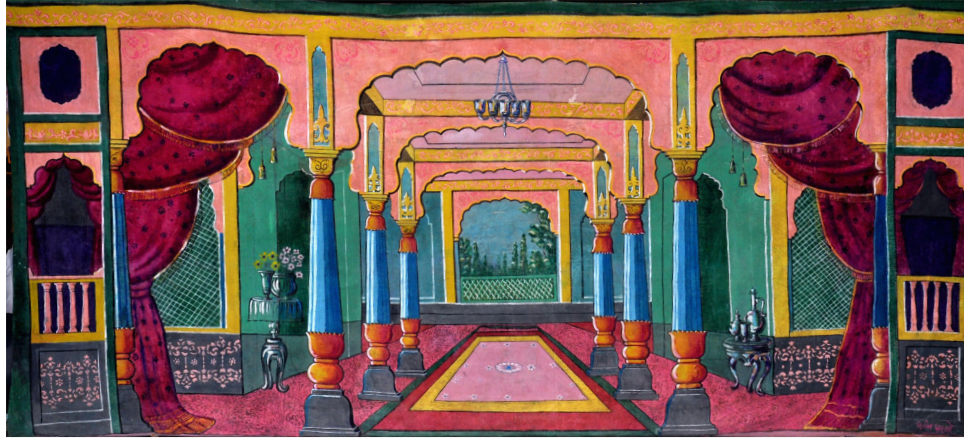


11. Mahal lal galicha

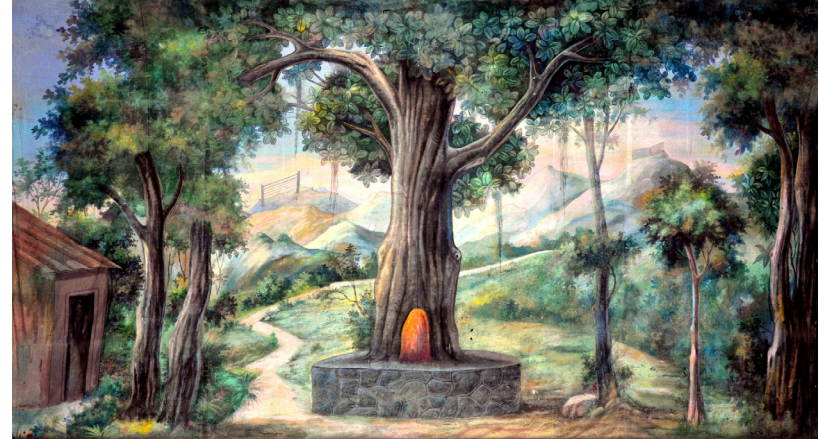


12. Mahal Juna Kharab





13. Mahal Juna Ripent Chota



14. Mhasoba Jangal



15. New Gao Gramin Rasta



16. New Gao Rasta Shahri





17. New Garden



18. Samjjik Ghar Juna

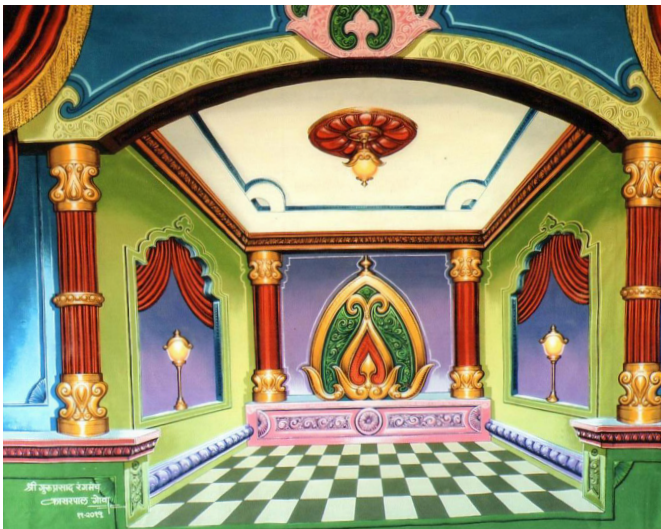


19. Rasta Gao Juna



### 3. Theatrical Backdrops Collection of Kala Academy, Goa

Kala Academy, Goa also has a large collection of theatrical backdrops. Most of these curtains have been rendered by Somnath Naik and his son Kishore and Kiran over the years. Another painter has been Nilkanth Khap in partnership with the Naik brothers.





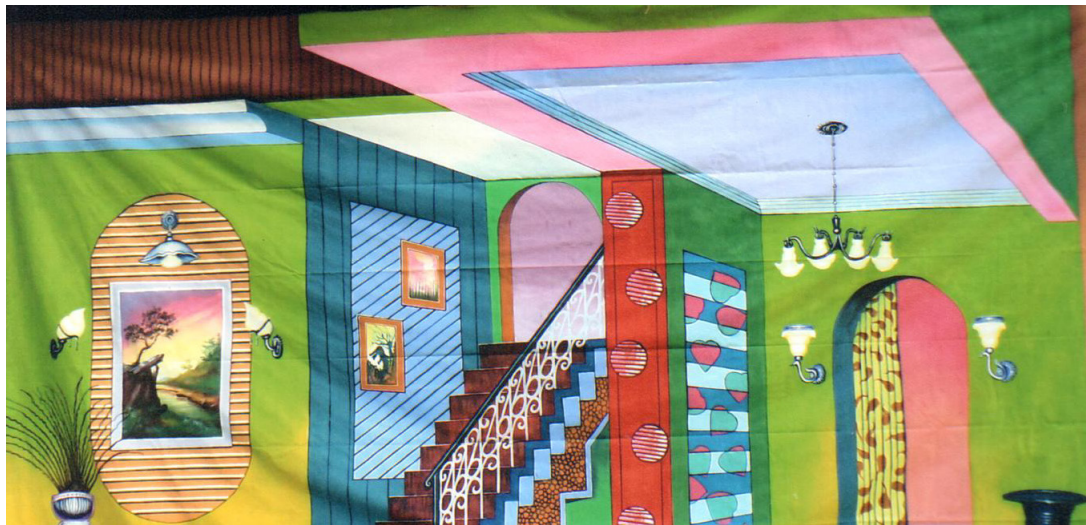




## The Art of Theatrical Backdrops









## The Art of Theatrical Backdrops









## The Art of Theatrical Backdrops









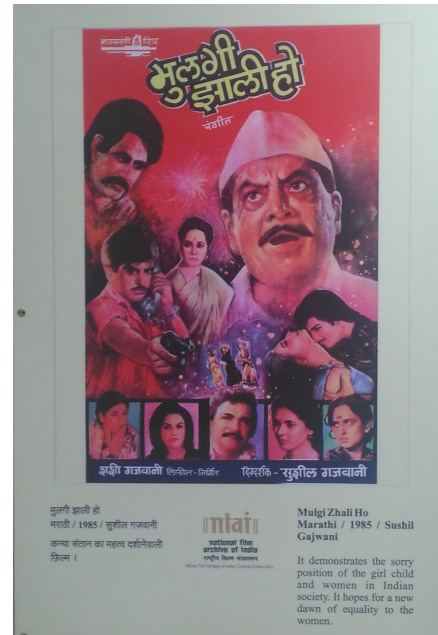
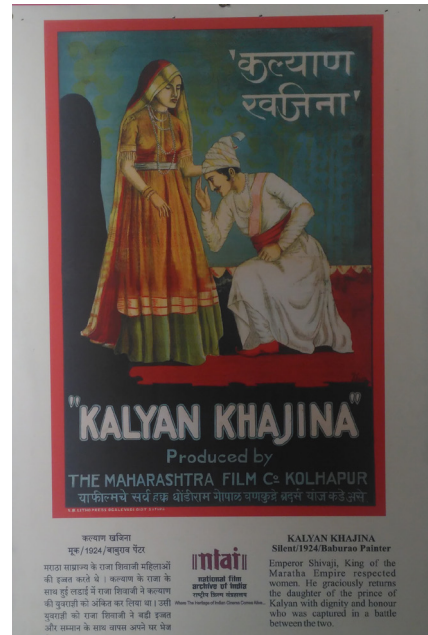
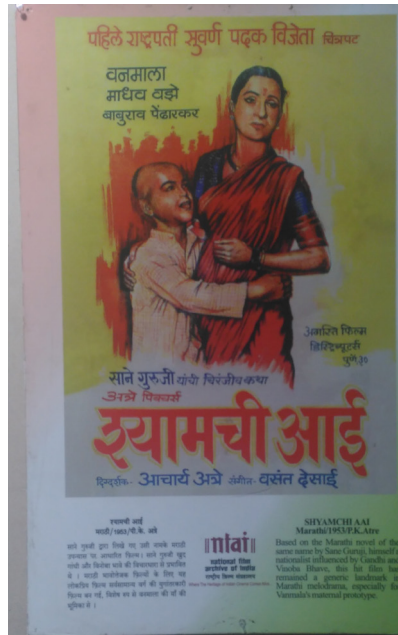
## The Art of Theatrical Backdrops





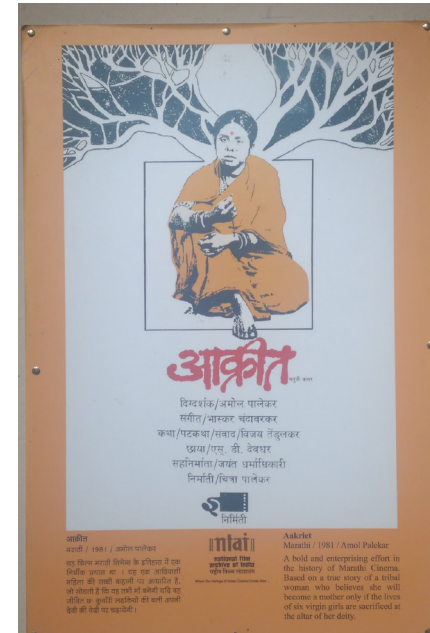
#### 4. Film Posters Collection of FTII, Pune

This institute has a large number of photographs of old dramas and movies. They also have movie poster collection. Their curtain collection is very limited though. Most of the photographs are in black and white. There are numerous other photographs which have not been incorporated here as they are on a wide variety of subjects.





## The Art of Theatrical Backdrops





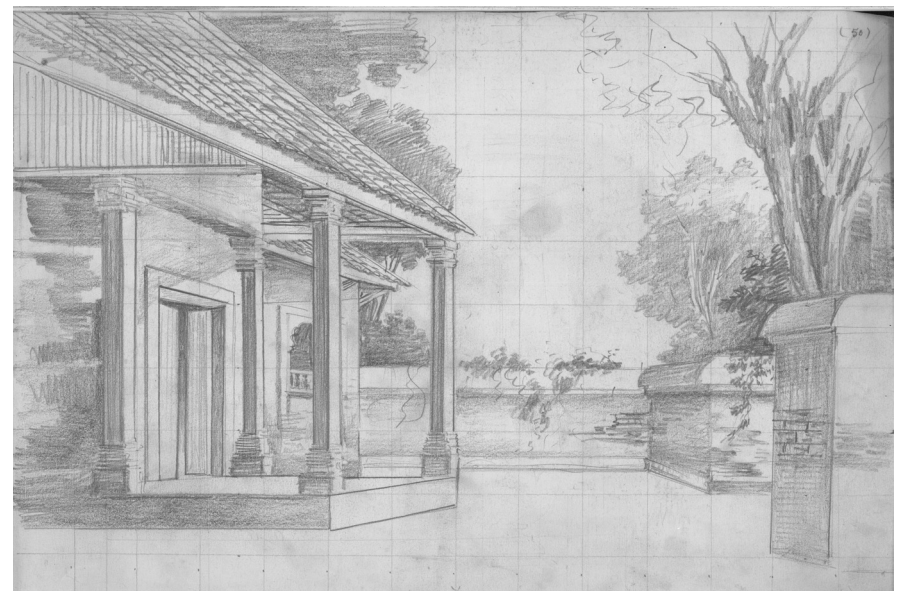
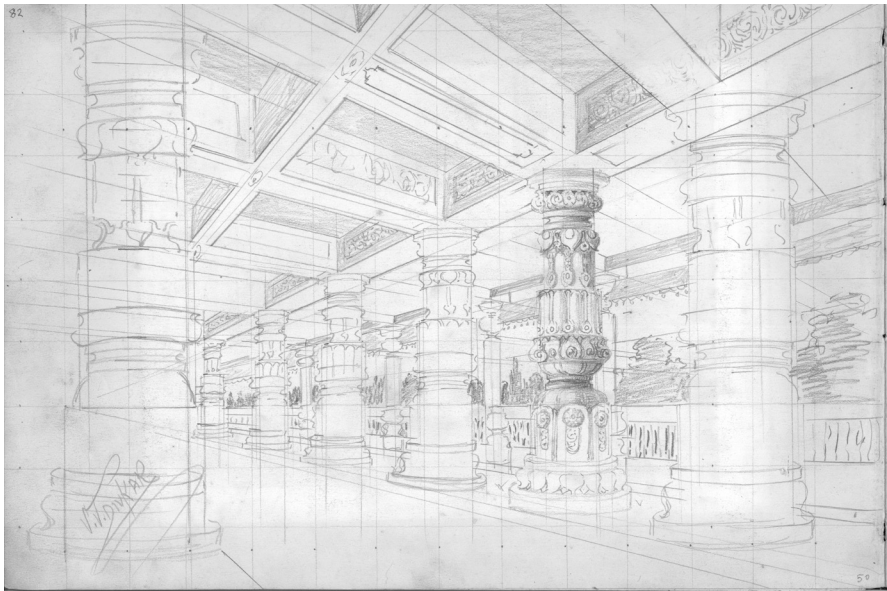
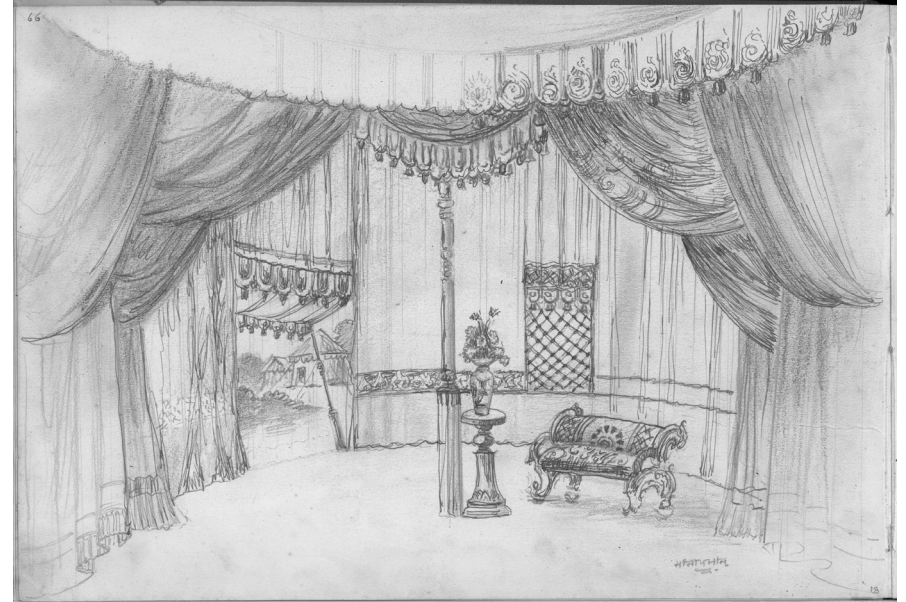
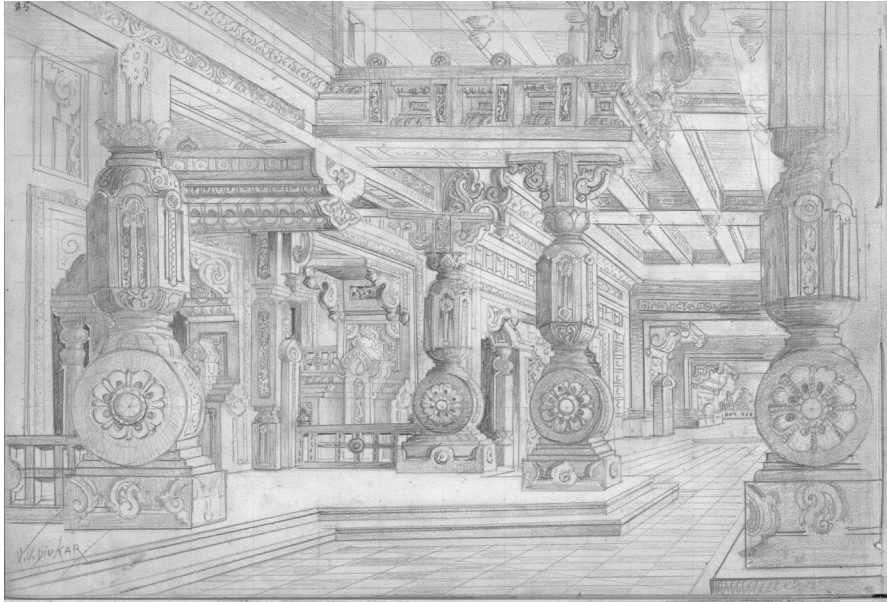


## APENDIX 5: SKETCH BOOK DRAWINGS OF ARTIST V. V. DIVKAR

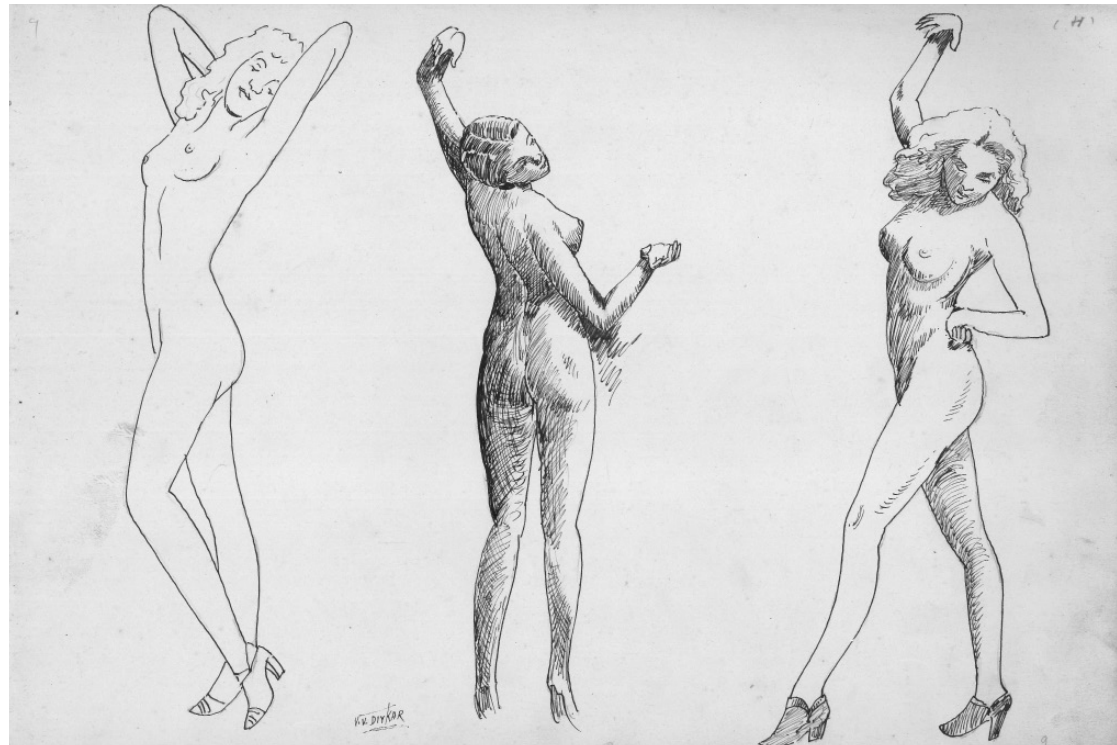
We have already mentioned the 3 sketchbooks located by us having drawings by the artist V. V. Divkar. Most of these sketches are in pencil, some in watercolor, some in black ink. They offer a fascinating insight into the artists mind and work. Some of the images have been attached here with some others have been depicted in the book.



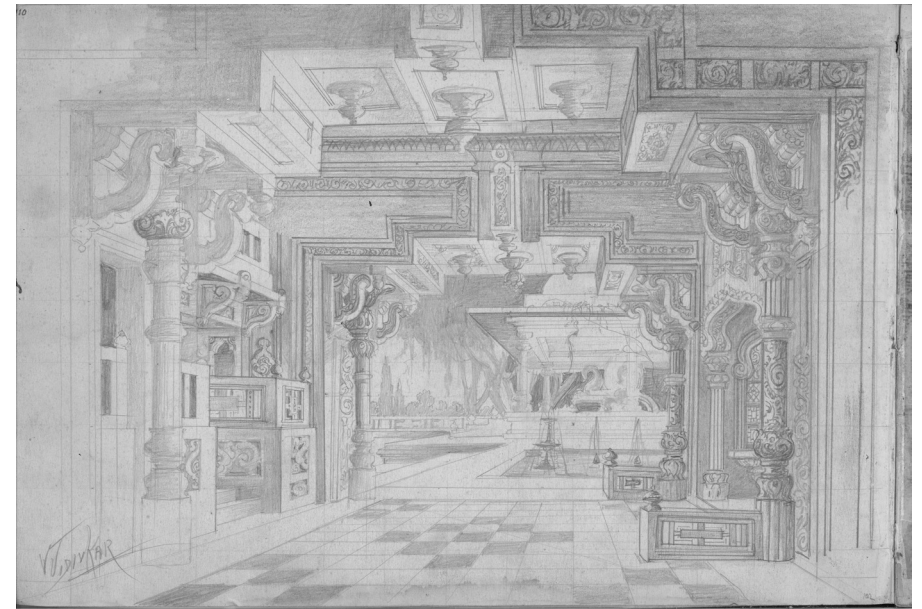
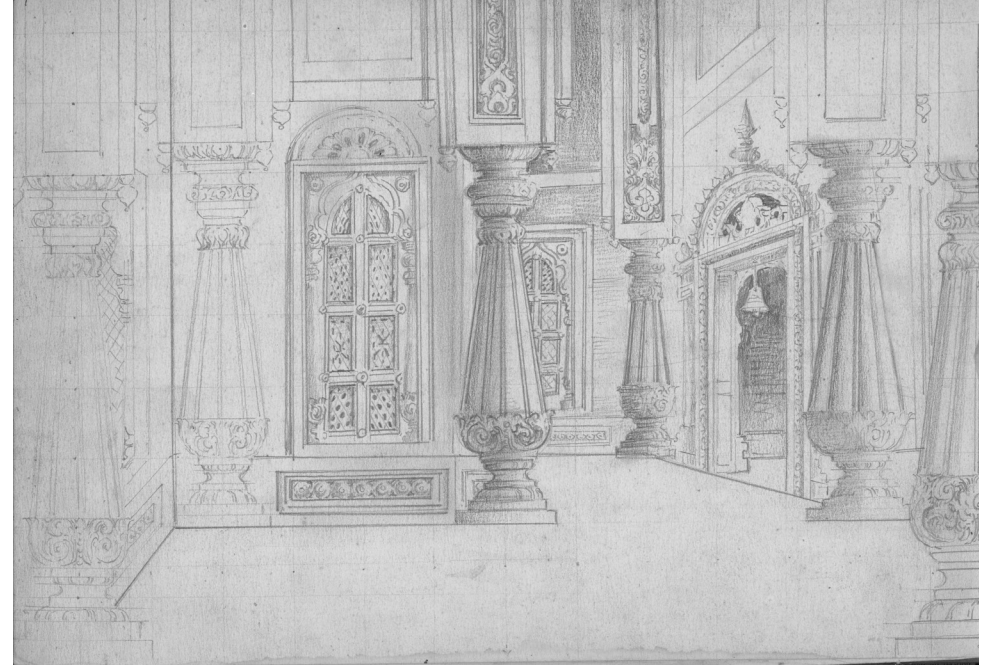
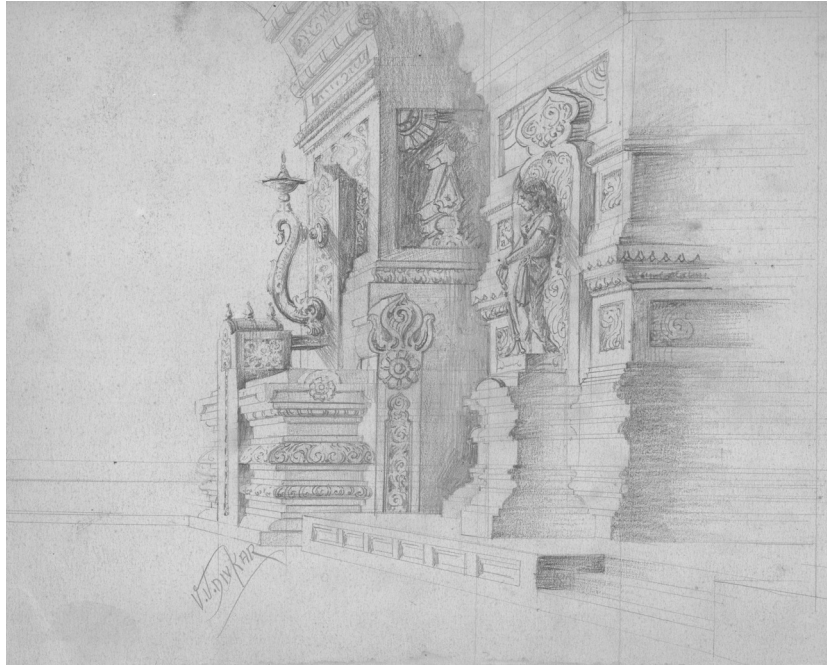






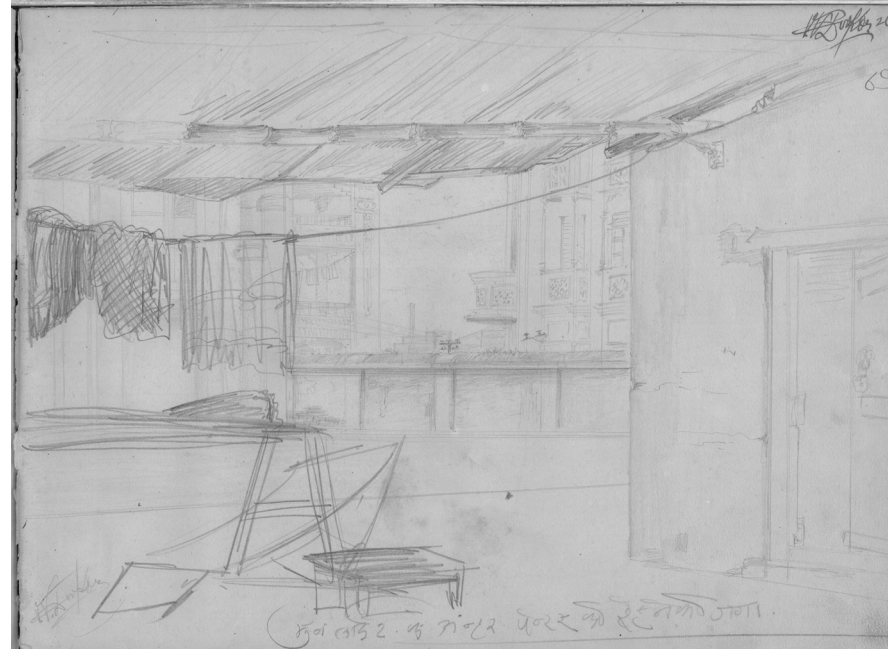




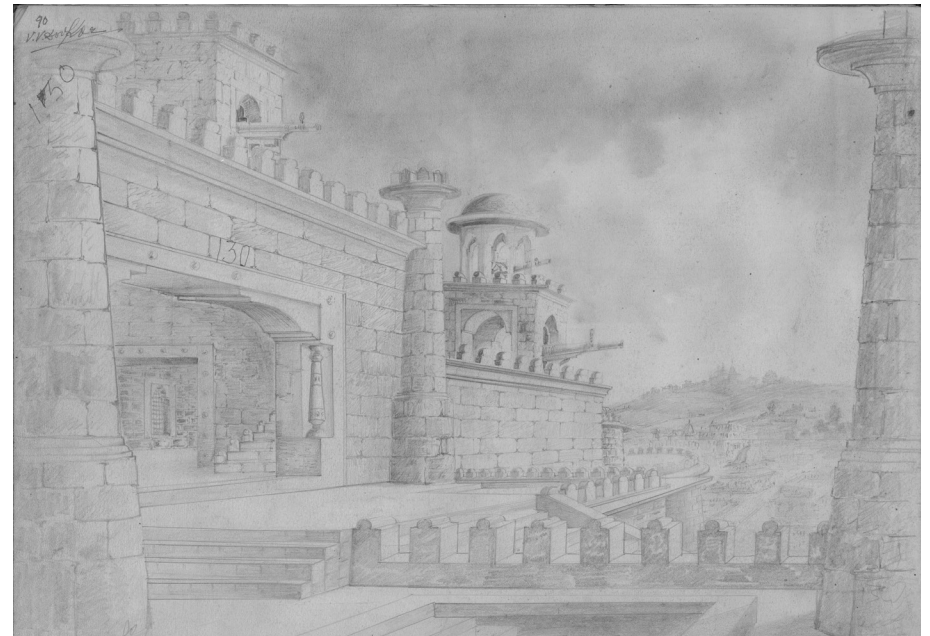
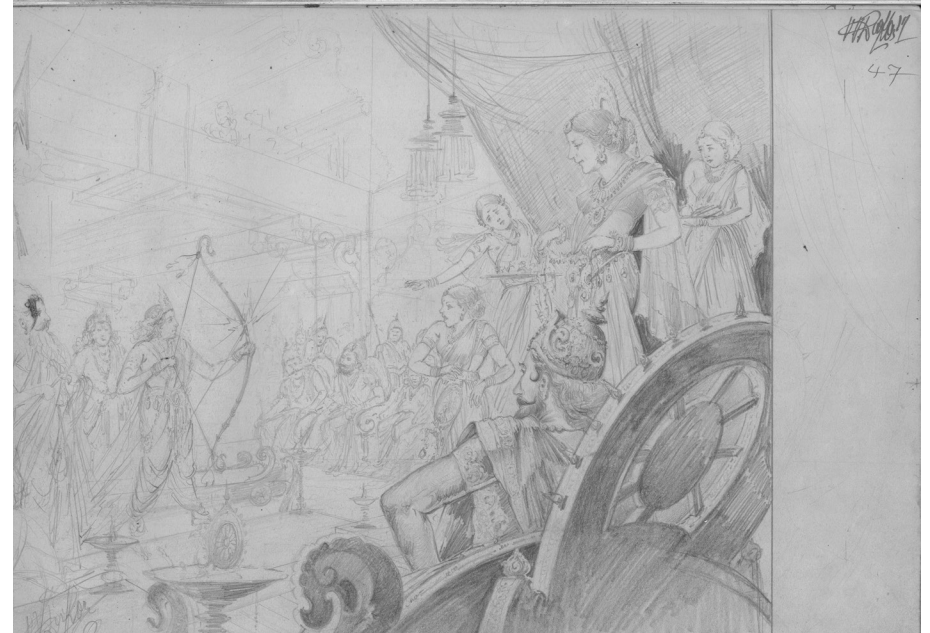




# The Art of Theatrical Backdrops



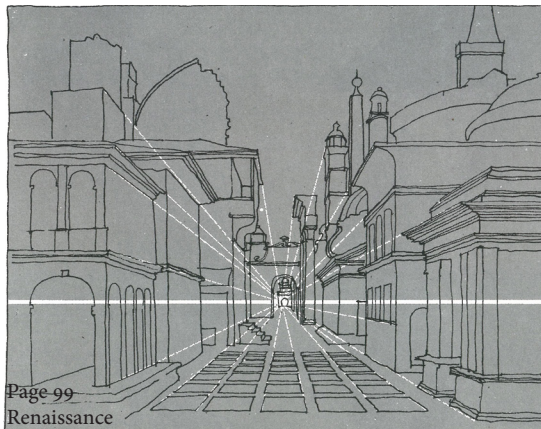




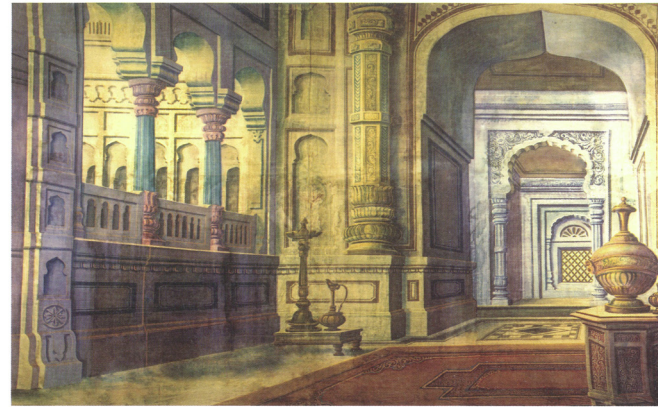


## APENDIX 6: DEPICTION OF PERSPECTIVES

These graphic images of various perspectives are compared with Western and Indian drawings. Their study is conducive for understanding architectural renderings.



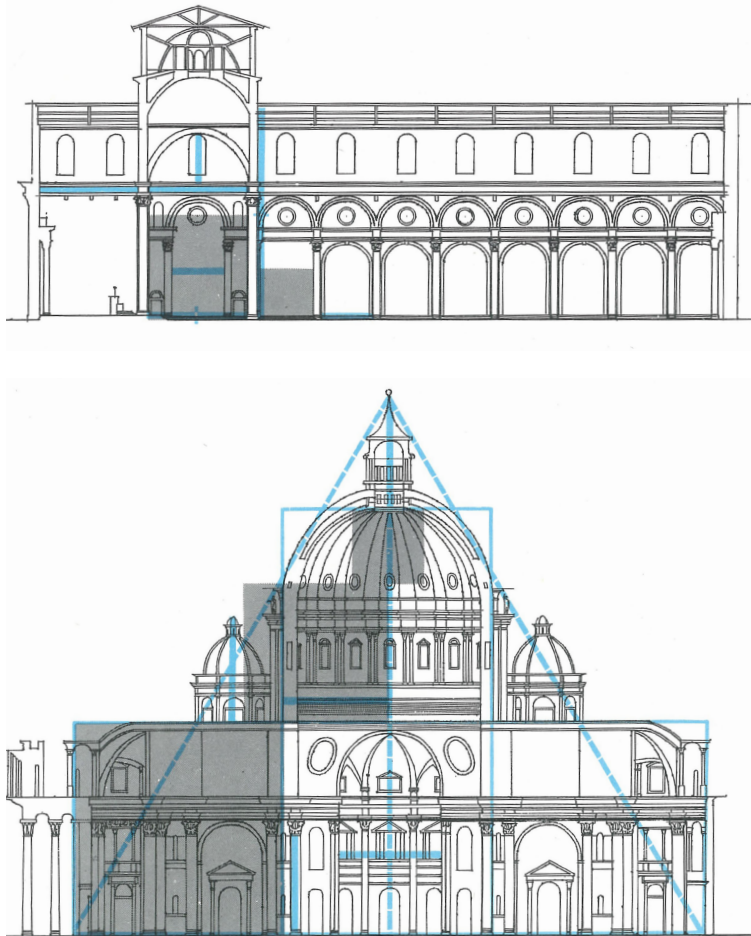
The principles of perspective was a study that fascinated Renaissance artists as demonstrated in these illustrations. The street scene at the top, sketched by the Sienese painter and architect Baldassare Peruzzi, shows how perspective conveys an illusion of depth on a flat surface. At the bottom, in a simplified version of the sketch, superimposed white lines follow Peruzzi's principal lines, converging at a single "vanishing point" (centre). Artist of renaissance carefully plotted such converging lines as a guide before they executed a painting.



The corresponding images adapted from the book 'Painted Sceneries' by Dr.Allana pg 32-33, 52-53, 62-63, show similarity of drawings of the architectural structures by an Indian Artist, in this case most probably V. V. Divkar who was quite adept at such drawings on large scale canvasses.

It is to be noted that these renderings of backdrops with architectural details and ornamental embellishments on the pillared structures have been of recent origins like early 20th Century, whereas the drawings on the left have been executed in the 16th and 17th Centuries- really the science of Art has been well-knit since times immemorial.





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Renaissance

Meanwhile, Renaissance architects were preoccupied with the harmony of proportions. They tried to relate the dimensions of every major part of their buildings to one module or basic unit of length. In Brunelleschi's church of San Lorenzo in Florence (above) the module is one side of the large shaded square. This is twice the width of the side aisles (small squares) and one half the height of the building (below the roof line)

Michelangelo, a century later, used more complex ratios. In his plan for St. Peter's (below), which was never adopted, he used a single module (blue bars) for the width of the crossing (centre) and the height of columns, lantern and cupolas. The building's units, measured vertically, are related in a 3::1 ratio, as indicated by the shaded areas, the largest unit having a side two modules long. The outline of the building defines an equilateral triangle, a geometric shape perfect in its symmetry.



Sketch by Artist V. V. Divkar

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Elkunchwar Mahesh  
Elphinstone Theatrical Company  
Empress Victoria Theatrical Company  
England  
European  
  
Fairclough  
False finishing  
Faust  
Ferguson College  
Figurative



Film and Television Institute

Film sets

Framji Cowasji

Gadkari Ram Ganesh

Gaekwad Maharaj Sayaji Rao of Baroda

Gandharva Natak Mandali

Ganpati

Ganpatrao Bodas

Ganpatrao Joshi

Garg B. D.

Gas lights

Gautami Balashri

Gautamiputra Satakarni

Gilding

Girgaum

Gladstone Solomon

Goa

Goethe

Gopichand Raja

Government of Bombay

Grant Road Theatre

Greater Bombay

Gujarati

H. Fawcett

Hansen Kathryn

Hindi Theatrical Company

Hindoo Dramatic Corps

Hindustani

Horniman Circle

Human anatomy

Ibsen  
Ichalkaranjkar Natak Mandali  
India

J. J. Hospital  
J. J. School of Art  
Jamsethji Jeejeebhoy  
Joglekar  
Joshi Waman Gopal

Kale P. S.  
Kalidasa  
Karkhanis Trimbakrao  
Karnataka  
Keertane Vinayak Janardhan  
Kelewadi  
Khadilkar  
Khetwadi Theatre  
Kirloskar Natak Mandali  
Kolhapurkar Mandali  
Kolhapurkar Natak Company  
Kolhatkar  
Kraus  
Krishna

Lalitkaladarsha  
Landscape  
Lewis Drama Company  
Linear perspective  
Lokmanya  
London



Maharashtra  
Maharashtra Film Company  
Maharashtra Natak Mandali  
Mahrukh  
Maratha rulers  
Marathi  
Mehta Vijaya  
Merchant of Venice  
Mestry Baburao  
Mestry brothers  
Mohan Raoul  
Moonlight Theatres  
Moreshwar Vishnu Mahajani  
Motiram Gajanan Rangnekar  
Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh  
Muslims

Nagpur  
Naik Kiran  
Naik Kishore  
Naik Somnath  
Narad  
Nasharvanji Forbes  
Nataki  
Nati-Sutradhar  
Native populace  
Natu K. G.  
Natya Manwantar  
Natya Niketan  
Natya Sangeet  
Natyakala  
Natyakatharnava  
Natyamala  
New Alfred

New Grant Road  
Non-linear perspective

Oil paints  
Othello

Painting  
Parsi  
Parsi Nataks  
Parsi Theatre Committee  
Patanjali  
Patkar Shankar Atmaram  
Patwardhan Raja Chintamanrao  
Perspective  
Pestaji Dhanji Master  
Pestaji Madan  
Pesu Madan  
Plastering  
Point of Convergence  
Poona Theatre  
Portuguese  
Prabhadevi  
Prabhat  
Pradhan Ramchandra  
Proscenium  
Pune  
Punekar Mandali

Rajapurkar Company  
Rangbhoomi  
Raoul Ramesh  
Ratal  
Ravindra Natyagriha  
Raw Sienna



Realism  
Red  
Remington Messrs. and Co.  
Renaissance  
Retouching  
Roman Theatre  
Rotunda  
  
Sangli  
Saras  
Saraswati  
Satavahana  
Sculpting  
Shah Jahan  
Shahraj Raje  
Shahunagarwasi Natak Mandali  
Shakespeare  
Shakuntala  
Shankarsheth Jagannath  
Sheikh Fattelal  
Shivaji Maharaj  
Sholapur  
Shri Subhash Bhagwat  
Squaring Technique  
St. Thomas Cathedral  
Stage scenery  
Subhadra  
Swadeshi Hitchintak Company  
  
Tagore Rabindranath  
Taming of the Shrew  
Tembe Govind Sadashiv  
Tendulkar Vijay  
Thanjavur

The Elphinstone Society

The Parsi Baronet Club

Theatron

Theatrum

Tilak

Tilak Swaraj Fund

Turpentine

Umber

UNESCO

V. V. Divkar

Vanishing point

Venkoji

Victoria blue

Victoria Company

Victoria Theatrical Company

Warerkar Mama

Watsons Hotel

Watve

Western India

Western theatre

White zinc

William Wasencraft

Winsor and Newton

Yellow

Zoroastrian Theatrical Club

Zoroastrian Theatrical Company











Late 19th century filler drawing utilized for practice purposes. Artist V. V. Divkar.