

USAGE OF ARENAS IN KŌLAM AND INDIAN CHHAU THEATRE

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There has been close relationship between India and Sri Lanka for centuries in the sphere of religious, economic and social activities. Folk theatre and dance can be considered as an important art with a clear cultural identity, and this is true of both India and Sri Lanka. The Indian and the Sri Lankan folk theatre forms possess a very long history. *Kōlam*, *Nadagam* and *Sokari* are the main folk theatre traditions in Sri Lanka. There are various forms of folk play specific to each state in India. *Bhāgavatamelā* and *Therukkoottu* of Tamilnādu, *Yaksagāna* of Karnātaka, *Kuravanji* of Andhra Pradesh, *Kūḍiyāttam* of Kērala, *Bavāi* of Madhya Pradesh, *Navtānki* of Uttara Pradesh and Hariyana, *Rāslīla* of Assam and *Jātrā* and *Chhau* of West Bengal may be cited as examples. Of all these various forms of Indian and Sri Lankan folk theatres, we have chosen for our study the traditional masked play *Kōlam* and *Chhau*. The *Kōlam* theatre has been created for the entertainment of the village folk. Which is prevalent along the southern coastal belt and Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara districts of the Western Province of Sri Lanka. *Chhau* theatre has been created for the entertainment of the village folk as *Kolam*. It is found in performance in West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa states of India. The *Chhau* theatre consists of three traditions named according to the regions they are prevalent in. It is known as Purulia *Chhau*, Seraikela *Chhau* and Mayurbhanj *Chhau*.

The aim of this study is to inquire into the usage of arenas in *Kōlam* and *Chhau* theatre. From this study, it is clear that there can be seen some similarities and distinguishing characteristics between the *Kōlam* and *Chhau*. Herein, it is important to note some similarities of the both traditions. Selection of the bare ground or courtyard for the construction of the open arena, mostly, construction of the arena done close to a sacred place, audiences usually sit on the bare ground around the arena, the location of the dressing room is adjacent to the arena (barring Purulia *Chhau*), the chorus and the orchestras are seated on the floor can be cited as examples. These characteristic features found in folk theatres in general, can also be seen in basic features in Indian folk theatres such as *Jatra* and *Yaksagana*. Although the open circular acting arena is a feature common to the *Kōlam* and *Chhau*, it is used only in the Purulia *Chhau* and *Kōlam*. The manner in which the audience in the Purulia *Chhau* theatre watches the performance is shared by the *Kōlam* theatre too. The way the spectators watch the drama is quite different from Mayurbhanj and Seraikella traditions but quite similar to *Kōlam*. In these two traditions there is no shelter for the audience and the spectators watch the performance in the open either standing or seated.