



In the early 1900s, musicians, artists, and theatre actresses began to settle in Bombay, and cultural centres prevailed in the streets. At the foot of Malabar Hill, on New Queens Road, the Opera House welcomed many connoisseurs of art. Its patrons enjoyed majestic live performances, which got the ball rolling in theatrical entertainment around the city.

The Royal Opera House, since its early days, thrived as a cultural hub, hosting music schools and residences of musicians and vocalists (Savant et al. 2002, 4). During the first decade of the 20th century, the City Improvement Trust implemented various development schemes across the city, including Girgaon Chowpatty and the vicinity of the opera house. These initiatives aimed to create new streets, enhancing ventilation and communication linkages between different parts of the city (Savant et. al. 2002, 4).

Joseph J. Sheppard (1916) writes in his book *Territorials in India*, the presence of the theatre that “contributed in a very great measure to the general improvement of the neighbourhood is evidenced on every hand by the very handsome buildings which, with mushroom-like growth, have sprung up in the near vicinity of the Royal Opera House” (Sheppard 1916, 129).

During the restoration, the essential and traditionally elusive boxes, integral to opera houses globally, have been meticulously reinstalled at the Royal Opera House. Adorned with Corinthian columns and embellished with curvilinear floral motifs, these boxes are painted in a stunning palette of white, gold, and red, the colour scheme that defines the aesthetic of the Opera House (Desai 2016).



In an interview with the Curator of the Royal Opera House and CEO of Avid Learning, Mr Asad Lalljee, a wealth of enriching anecdotes adds to the overall sublimity of this stately structure. Mr Lalljee says, “In 1911, when King George came to India when the gateway of India was inaugurated, he also inaugurated the Opera House, and this is how it got its name, Royal”.

The cornerstone was laid in 1910, and the theatre was inaugurated in 1911 by King George V. It was completed in 1916 and opened for public use. Its Baroque design did not fail to seamlessly integrate Indian and European detail, with its ceilings specifically crafted to enable natural acoustics to reach the audience irrespective of their levels of seating (Desai, 2008). The Opera House was conceived as an idea by Maurice Bandmann, an entertainer from Calcutta, and Jehangir Framji Karaka, a primary investor who served as the head of a coal brokerage firm in Bombay.





Built in 1925 during the zenith of Parsi theatre groups or natak mandali, the prosperous businessman and ardent theatre enthusiast Karaka invested a staggering sum of seven-and-a-half lakh rupees in his ambitious project. The construction, overseen by the renowned English architect Mr. Morris Bandman, was executed with exceptional craftsmanship, making the Opera House a masterpiece of its time, showcasing exemplary Baroque architecture adorned with decorative cast iron balustrades, semi-circular arches, and stone-bracketed balconies (The Bombay Explorer 1989, 8). The initial interior design featured orchestra stalls equipped with comfortable cane chairs and 26 rows of boxes and couches behind the stalls. The Dress Circle also provided an unobstructed view of the stage, offering a comfortable experience for the audience. The affluent dwellers of Bombay had the privilege of watching international drama troops perform at this prestigious venue, predominantly from England (Sheppard 1916, 116).

By 1917, the Opera House, like many other theatres, underwent a transformation, incorporating cinema into its stream of events (Gandhi 2010, 73). In 1925, its identity as a theatre for drama ceased when it was rented out exclusively for the screening of films. With the advent of talkie films in the early 1930s, cinema experienced a surge in popularity. To accommodate the screenings, in 1935, the Opera House underwent modifications to adapt to the changing times. The opera house was also an excellent venue for fashion shows. Swiftly transforming into a venue for the performing arts, the Opera House hosted regular shows by repertory drama troupes from England, catering to the entertainment of the burra sahibs. Reminiscing about the era, Durga Bhagwat, a distinguished social scientist and Marathi litterateur, reminisced about patrons dressed fashionably, arriving in horse-drawn carriages in the Bombay Explorer. During intermissions, packets of pistachios and almonds were sold for four annas. Witnessing a play at the Opera House became a symbol of fashion and prestige during the nineties (The Bombay Explorer, 1989, 8).



Ideal Pictures Ltd. purchased the theatre in 1935 and conducted a thorough renovation the subsequent year. “Lata Mangeshkar’s first performances were known to be staged at the Opera House. It also ran very successfully as a movie theatre. Films like ‘Amar Akbar Anthony’ were screened for several years”, says Mr. Lalljee. However, the advent of video films had a detrimental effect on the popularity of single screen cinema by the 1980s, leading to the closure of several theatres by the 1990s in Mumbai (Plaque, Opera House, Mumbai).

In the subsequent decades, ownership of the property transitioned from the Madans to the Patels and eventually to the royal house of Gondal, a former Princely State in Saurashtra (Gandhi, 2010, 73). More than a century since its first opening, the Royal Opera House was reopened in 2016. The restoration was undertaken by a conservation architect, Abha Narain Lambah, and was commissioned by the son of Maharaja Shri Vikramsinhji of Gondal, Jyotendrasinhji, whose father had purchased the Royal Opera House in 1952 (Desai 2008).

Abha Lambah also undertook the restoration of the original chandeliers in the entrance foyer on the ground floor, which originally belonged to David Sassoon and adorned his residence, Sans Souci. To enhance the interior brightness, a distinct feature of the Opera House’s original design, the walls were adorned with bevelled mirrors. This meticulous restoration not only brought back the historical charm of the chandeliers but also paid homage to the Opera House’s architectural legacy by preserving and accentuating its unique features (Desai 2016). The theatre was restored to its original splendour and was installed with technologically advanced sound and lighting systems to cultivate a new artistic experience for the 21st century connoisseurs of art (Desai 2008).

“The economic impact of the restoration of the Opera House is very significant”, says Asad Lalljee. He adds, “Besides supporting the creative economy as being a catalyst for artistic production, you are rejuvenating a neighbourhood. From the chaiwala at the corner of the road, to the cobbler, to the small shops, are all getting better business. Buildings get renovated and sometimes painted, restaurants have opened around the area and real estate prices become more desirable. There is an exponential effect. It’s not just about the restoration of the building, it’s about infusing vitality into the neighbourhood simultaneously and supporting the creative economy.”

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