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INTERPRETING THEATRE AS A COMMUNICATION MEDIUM

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Abstract

Communication as a social tool includes a wide range of functions such as instruction, persuasion, education, entertainment, development and so on. Over the ages, all the communication mediums have evolved themselves to accommodate the various functions of communication and this is true of the theatre as well. This paper is a humble endeavour towards interpreting the theatre as a communication medium that can significantly contribute towards ably performing the various

communication functions. It also seeks to deliberate upon the need for approaching the study of communication in the Indian perspective drawing comparisons between Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* and Bharata's *Nātyasāstra*.

Key Words: Theatre, Communication, *Nātyasāstra*, *Poetics*, *Rhetoric*

Introduction

“In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile.... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.”

- Albert Camus

Thus writes Albert Camus in his seminal work, “The Myth of Sisyphus”. However, the universe that Camus talks of is representative not only of one physical world as a whole but a number of small mini worlds that individuals create of their own. Perhaps it is only fair then that in context of theatre, the stage is representative of the audience's world and the actor represents the individuals viewing the act as theatre, essentially, refers to performing a drama on stage. A drama is considered to be all-inclusive. It embraces all types of topics and represents all kinds of natures, as it is intended for all classes of people. Thus, it is a mirror of human existence intended to be presented on the stage. But as Victor Hugo says, ‘If the mirror is an ordinary one, it produces a poor, faithful but colourless image; it must therefore be a focusing mirror.’ Thus, drama must provide a physical semblance to human existence on the stage. (Ramamurti, 1964)

Drama occupies a significant place in Indian culture. India has always been a paradise for art lovers, be it music, dance or drama. However, perhaps it would be fair to place drama a notch above music and dance because drama essentially incorporates both the forms. The various aspects of drama have been comprehensively discussed in a particular text composed in ancient India known as the *Nātyasāstra*. The *Nātyasāstra* ascribed to the Indian sage Bharata is generally considered to be the earliest treatise on dramaturgy. The Sanskrit term for ‘Drama’ is *Nāṭya*. *Nāṭya*, says, Bharata Muni, is an imitation of the various emotions and situations of the people through *abhinaya* (acting). The word *Abhinaya* is a combination of two words, ‘*abhi*’¹ meaning ‘towards’ and ‘*ni*’ meaning ‘to

¹ abhi—towards (Srimad Bhagavad Gita 1.14.12)

carry'. Thus, *abhinaya* literally means carrying the performance of a play to the point of direct ascertainment of its meaning towards the audience. (Pandya, 1990)

But then, the question emerges as to how the actor shall carry the meaning towards the audience. Herein comes the role and importance of communication. Communication refers to the act of transmission of ideas between individuals through the use of significant symbols. It is a process by which a person or a group of persons attempts to make another person or a group of person aware of its ideas on a particular subject. It is of paramount importance to social living as social life can exist only when meaningful symbols are transmitted from one individual to another. Thus, communication essentially refers to the process of establishing commonness among the participants involved in the act of communication through the act of information sharing. When any communication process continues for a considerable period of time, particular attitudes and values are inculcated in the minds of the audience which ultimately leads to building of social relationships. Emphasizing the importance of communication in building up of relationships, Raymond Williams asserts that men and societies are tied together to relationships in describing, learning, persuading and exchanging experiences. This exchange of experience is facilitated by communication. (Mukhopadhyay, 1999) Thus, it is only fair that theatre is seen as a medium of establishing a relationship of commonness between the actor (communicator) and the audience (communicated) that hinges on the art of communication.

Communication as a human function is multi-dimensional in nature. While communication has primarily been regarded as an information sharing process, the scope of communication is vast indeed. It includes a wide range of functions such as instruction, persuasion, education, entertainment, development and so on. Over the ages, all the communication mediums have evolved themselves to accommodate the various functions of communication and this is true of the theatre as well. We shall now discuss how the theatre as a communication medium can significantly contribute towards performing the various communication functions.

Information Function

The first and foremost function of any communication endeavour remains information. It is from the information function of communication that all the other functions find application. The primary function of any form of media, thus, is to collect, store, process and disseminate information in order to help the receivers understand and react to their existing environment. (Andal, 2004) This is true of

the theatre as well. Since ancient times, the main function of the theatre has been to disseminate some form of information, either directly or indirectly to the audience which fulfils the basic need of communication process. As a matter of fact, in the ancient times, it was widely regarded that the duty of the dramatist was to equally entertain the masses and to provide men with information which gives ample opportunities to flourish him.

The relevance of theatre as an important medium of informing the masses was brought to the fore when this medium was utilized in states like Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to apprise the rural population of the Kargil conflict. At a time when there has been an exponential growth in broadcast media and means of transport and travel are within the reach of the common man; the theatre emerged as perhaps one of the few successful channels to inform the rural people of the various aspects of the conflict as also the valour and sacrifices made by the Indian soldiers. The plays were equally successful in instilling a feeling of patriotism in the audience. (Vir Bala Aggarwal, 2002)

Command or instructive function

The second important function of communication is command or instructive function. Communication as a command or instructive function posits that the primary purpose of communication is telling the recipients of the information what to do, how to do when to do etc. Theatre has always been a chosen medium of instruction since the ancient times. In the words of Bertolt Brecht, "Oil, inflation, war, social struggle, the family, religion, the meat market, all became subjects for theatrical representation. Choruses enlightened the spectator about facts unknown to him....Right and Wrong courses of action were shown. People were shown who knew what they were doing, and others who did not. The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished not just to explain the world but also to change it. So we had philosophy, we had instruction." (Mukhopadhyay, 1999)

Persuasive function

The third important function of communication is the persuasive function. According to David Berlo (1960), the sole purpose of communication is to influence people and persuade them into any particular way of thinking or acting. The persuasive function of communication is extremely important for inducing people into changing their behaviour in any particular desirable direction. Theatre, through repeated use of messages over long period of time, can persuade its audience in the

formation of certain attitudes and behaviour patterns. History has shown us how the theatre has often acted as a vehicle for agitation and propaganda.

The first significant drama of social protest in India was *Nildarpana* (The Mirror of Indigo Planters) by Dinabandhu Mitra, published in 1860. The play dramatizes incidents drawn from the revolution of 1858 in which Bengali indigo cultivators were mercilessly persecuted by the British planters for refusing to sow their crops. The play aroused considerable public sentiment in Bengal against British rule and paved the way for a host of patriotic works written along similar lines elsewhere in the country. (Richmond, 1973)

Education function

Education has always been one of the most important functions of communication throughout ages. However, communication for education has been generally limited to formal communication practices and has rarely been experimental in nature. However, theatre can be effectively used as a medium of education. In Chapter I of the *Nāṭyasāstra*, the great sage Bharata narrates to us the educational purpose of drama as declared by Lord Brahma. Thus says Bharata, *“This (Nāṭya/ Drama) teaches duty to those bent on doing their duty, love to those who are eager for its fulfilment, and it chastises those who are ill-bred or unruly, promotes self-restraint in those who are disciplined, gives courage to cowards, energy to heroic persons, enlightens men of poor intellect and gives wisdom to the learned... It will [also] give relief to unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief or [over]-work, and will be conducive to observance of duty (dharma) as well as to fame, long life, intellect and general good and will educate people.”* (Ghosh, 1950)

One of the primary concerns related to education today is the excessive workload upon the students that threatens to have a de-humanising effect upon them where they increasingly find themselves cut-off from the mainstream society. The theatre can come to our rescue in this regard. Techniques of drama blur many boundaries by transforming the formal space of the classroom through the use of games and conversations, sometimes even actually breaking down its physical order. Some minimising of the social distance between the teacher and the taught infuses trust in the latter and makes conversation possible. More than interaction, the regard and respect of community practices that honour children's out-of school skills in storytelling can go a long way in making children communicative. (Singh, 2004)

Entertainment Function

Entertainment has emerged as an important function of communication. The entertainment function of communication was first proposed by Charles Wright. Prior to him, the utility of communication in Harold Laswell's opinion was limited to three functions – surveillance, correlation and transmission. While entertainment media are much more concerned with likeability and physical attractiveness, it is these characteristics that attract people to entertainment shows and can create attitude change via a peripheral route in entertainment settings. Generally speaking, the broadcast media such as TV and films best reflect this function. (Xiaoli Nan, (2004) However, the entertainment function of communication is by no means limited to the broadcast media. It is worth mentioning here that the theatre started as a medium of entertaining the masses. Entertainment, however, here is to be seen as an expression that addresses the broader canvas of providing relief to the people from the mundane concerns of life that includes multiple aspects of diversion such as delight, recreation, pastime or mere distraction from the problems of real life even if momentarily.

Development function

The importance of communication in mobilizing people and seeking their willing participation in the development of a country is well recognized. In India, this concern above reaching people, communicating with them and equipping them with new skills has been emphasized over and again in successive five year plans which provide the blue print of the country's planned development. (Kumar, 2006) While communication for development has generally been ascribed to the usage of the modern mass media forms, the latter half of the last millennium has shown us that the modern mass media forms have not been able to live up to the expectations of development communication planners in the developing nations. This is primarily owing to the fact that people still cannot connect themselves with the modern mass media forms as comfortable as with the traditional media forms of communication.

In this regard, the MacBride Commission in its report titled 'Many Voices One World' asserted, "Even when modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change. Extensive experience shown that traditional forms of communication can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic perceptions and unscientific that people have inherited as part of traditions and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Practitioners of the

traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivalled by any other means of communication.” (Kumar, 2006)

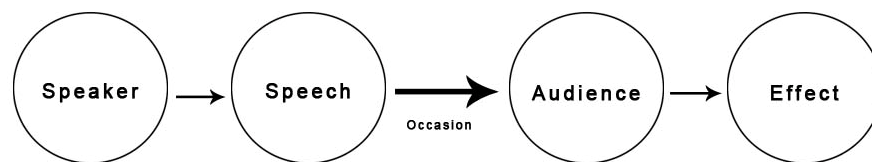
Theatre can be used as important mode of communication for development primarily owing to its certain qualities. It is one of the cheapest media available, it does not rely on literacy, it can be more flexible and topical than other media, and above all the audience can participate in the play making the theatre a genuine two-way medium for communicating information. (Kasoma, 1974) The theatre holds more relevance in Indian perspective primarily owing to the fact that the Indian folk theatre is a composite form of containing songs, music, dance, and drama that seeks to fulfil all the intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic needs of its spectators. It is more than entertainment, a complete emotional experience and creates a state of receptivity in which messages can be most effectively transmitted. Folk theatre has functioned as an instrument of social awareness, protest, and change. Regional rural drama performance is known to be dependable and persuasive change agents, acting as a bridge between different rural areas, and between rural and urban areas. Unlike in western theatre, folk performance is a composite art in India. It is a total art with fusion elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic ballad recitation, religion and festival peasantry. It imbibes ceremonials, rituals, belief and social system. It has deep religious and ritualistic overtones and then again, it can surely project social life, secular themes and universal values. (Kumar S. , 2012)

Conclusion

The theatre by its very nature and particularly because of its communality and its fictionalized situations provides a forum, whereby communication can easily take place without the attending antagonisms which would normally occur in a directly realistic situation. As part of an educational and organizational process, theatre can play a range of roles: bringing people together and creating contexts for collective reflection and action; drawing out participation and expression of popular concerns, and analysis; overcoming people's fears and rationalizations and building confidence and identity; stimulating discussion and a critical understanding of problems, contradictions, and structures underlining everyday reality; clarifying the possibilities and strategies for action; stirring people's emotions and mobilizing people for action. (Warritay, 1988)

It is worth mentioning here that the great Greek philosopher Aristotle who wrote the first Western treatise on drama, the *Poetics*, is also credited with the earliest model of human communication.

Though Aristotle himself never gave any model per se, the model has been derived by later thinkers from his ideas given in another treatise written by him, the *Rhetoric*, which essentially deals with the art of conversation. The model includes five essential elements of communication, i.e., the speaker, the speech or message, the audience, the occasion and the effect. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle presents his ideas on the art of speech construction by speakers for different audiences on different occasions for producing different effects. However, it would not be out of place to assume that Aristotle's idea was based on his personal experience of the Greek theatre and shaped by his observations on the same. As it appears, the speaker that Aristotle talks of, in all likelihood, refers to the actor while the occasion refers to the act of theatrical presentation. The remaining elements are important components of any dramatic act, that is, the speech by the actor, the audience experiencing the act and the effect produced in the minds of the audience.



ARISTOTLE'S MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

While Aristotle's model does give us a basic idea on the communication process that apparently takes place in our daily lives, it is found lacking in certain aspects of communication. Perhaps owing to the fact that Aristotle was primarily addressing the subject of speech construction in the *Rhetoric*, the importance of non-verbal communication in any act of communication seems to have been completely overlooked by him. This aspect of non-verbal communication has been comprehensively discussed and addressed in Bharata's *Nāṭyasāstra*. Having said so, Bharata does not undermine the importance of speech in communication. Thus says Bharata, "*One should take care of words... In this world, the Śāstras are made up of words and rest on words; hence there is nothing beyond words, and words are the source of everything. The Verbal representation is related to [a knowledge of] nouns (nāma), verbs (ākhyta), particle (nipāta), preposition (upasarga), nominal suffix (taddhita), compound words (samāsa), euphonic combination (sandhi) and case-endings (vibhakti).*" (Ghosh, 1950) Speech, Bharata, terms as *vācika*. However, Bharata takes note of the other aspects as well that play a vital role in deciding the outcome of any communication endeavour. These include:

1. Physical representation (*Angikā*)
2. Costumes and make-up (*Āharya*)
3. Temperament (*Sattva*)

Thus, Bharata emphasizes on approaching communication in a four-fold manner of expression comprising of *vācika*, *āngikā*, *sattva* and *āharya*. While Bharata postulates the four-fold principle of communication primarily in parlance of drama, it would not be out of place to assume that Bharata also had in his mind the universe while laying down the tenets. As Bharata ascribes the following words to Lord Brahma, “*The drama as I have devised, is a mimicry of actions and conducts of people, which is rich in various emotions, and which depicts different situations.*” Besides, this four-fold approach is indeed, a more, practical and hands on approach towards analysing and decoding the process of communication.

Communication, after all, is not merely about expression of either words or actions. Rather, it incorporates all the aspects of human expression that can play an effective part on conveying the ultimate meaning to the recipient of the information. The absence or disproportionate representation of any one of the given aspects necessarily results in confusion in the minds of the audience and that is what gives rise to the feeling of absurdity. No wonder then, the Indian approach to communication is referred to as *sādhāranīkaraṇa* which essentially means establishing a feeling of uniformity between the participants involved in an act of communication. This, in turn, can be achieved only when commonness is attained at the various intermediary levels of human interaction between the communicator and the communicated through their respective abilities. It is this feeling of commonness and uniformity that is the driving force of communication in this universe. The theatre being a miniature representation of the same is no different.

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