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## **PHILOSOPHIZING COMMUNICATION: A READING OF NATYASHASTRA**

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### **Abstract**

The art of successful communication has been at the forefront of human intellectual pursuit since our literary history. Since we conceive of the human society as an agglomeration of individuals co-existing in close and meaningful contact with one another, communication is the virtual chain of unity that keeps individuals in meaningful relationships with one another. This explains why theorists have sought to continuously fine-tune the art of communication so as to make them effective in the context of interpersonal relations. This aspect assumes a significance if theatre is conceived as a communication set-up involving the playwright, the actors and the audience. Applying this perspective to the ancient Sanskrit dramatic treatise of *Natyasastra* of Bharata, this paper argues that the grammar of dramaturgy enunciated in the treatise is, effectively, the grammar of communication that takes into account factors relevant to our understanding of communication today. The paper further establishes that the treatise as it stands is remarkably contemporary in scope and breadth of vision when we see it in the context of an inter-relationship between theatre and communication.

**Keywords:** Communication, *Natyashastra*, Dramaturgy.

It is universally agreed that 'good' communication has different connotations to different people in different contexts. Often, the meaning of a 'good' communication can vary in similar contexts involving different people. Whether 'communication' is defined rather straight-forwardly as 'flow of information from one person to another'<sup>1</sup> or in a far more comprehensive 'the process by which people interactively create, sustain and manage meaning'<sup>2</sup>, it is also settled that evolution of communication modes is imperative in the context of the fleeting nuances in which individuals express themselves. Central to any approach to communication is perhaps the utilitarian nature of it - in other words, communication is meant to serve a strictly purposive value at the very least.

Application of various theories and models of communication to the idea of the theatre is not new. In fact, drama has served as an instructing agent since its origins with the common notion being that a play is enacted to convey in a practical mode what might have been theorized in a succinct manner in prose or verse. The evolution of drama in the Middle Ages in England is an example of the need of instruction of the Biblical precepts in a manner that would reinforce precepts, remove ambiguity through illustration and make the moral meaning interesting and lively. It is in this context that a dramatic act can be interpreted as a communication mode that is designed specifically to eliminate or at least reduce uncertainty in communication. The Uncertainty Reduction Theory of Communication, commonly accredited to Charles R Berger and Richard J. Calabrese<sup>3</sup>, which defines communication as the act that is meant to reduce uncertainty in relationships, both personal and societal, might explain why drama that is meant to be instructive, operates in well defined methodological parameters. Generation of meaning, it is

assumed in this theory, can be optimally achieved through deductive strategies involving axioms and theorems. Central to the theory is the supposition that in initial interactions, an individual's primary concern is to decrease uncertainty and increase predictability regarding the behaviors of the self and the communicative partner. This idea is based on Heider's (1958) notion that individuals seek to make sense out of the events he perceives. Individuals must be able to engage in proactive and retroactive strategies to learn how to predict what will happen and also explain what has already happened. In his *Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, Heider's theory of "naïve psychology" suggested that individuals act as observers and analyzers of human behavior in everyday life and that individuals or groups gather information that helps them to predict and explain human behavior. He says : "The naïve factor analysis of action permits man to give meaning to action, to influence the actions of others as well as of himself, and to predict future actions,"<sup>4</sup>

It is in this context that a reading of *Natyasastra* assumes a contemporary significance. Not only is the treatise a work on the 'why and how' of a dramatic performance, it is, effectively a treatise on the art and scope of public communication. The *Natyasastra* is the oldest surviving work on Indian dramaturgy and is traditionally ascribed to the sage Bharata, though the original work says in the first chapter that it was composed by the God Brahma for the celestial deities ruled by Indra. Be that as it may, existing texts of the treatise might have been composed in the present form as late as seventh or eighth century AD though there is evidence to suggest that dramaturgy as an art form was studied even before Panini, the grammarian who lived in the third century BC.<sup>5</sup> *Natyasastra*, claimed as the fifth 'Veda', has its origins in the mythology of the Vedic Gods perhaps to reinforce a sense of sacredness to the act of the theatre. As the myth goes, the Gods approached Brahma, the father of the Gods, to create another Veda that would not be the

exclusive preserve of the 'twice-born' castes but would also be enjoyed universally. After a hearing, the father of the Gods designed a fifth Veda that would combine tradition - *itihasa* - with instruction for the benefit of all mankind. To accomplish this task he took from the *Rgveda* the element of recitation, from *Samveda* the songs, from *Yajurveda* the mimetic art, from *Atharvaveda* sentiment. Then he instructed Visvakarma, the divine architect to build a playhouse where the new Veda would be practised and the sage Bharata was to oversee the performance of the art thus created. Origin of a new art form is always tentative, irrespective of age or culture, and the elaborate myth has a definite invigorating purpose. By establishing a virtual intermingling of the best aspects of the existing texts, the *Natyasastra* seeks a position of power in society that was hitherto reserved only for the four Vedas. In a sense therefore the *Natyasastra* can be seen as a text that democratized an emerging art form by giving it the force of established literary and ritualistic conventions and at the same time making it available to anyone seeking enjoyment with instruction.

The text of the *Natyasastra* <sup>6</sup> as it now stands consists of six thousand *sutras* or verse stanzas divided into thirty-six chapters. Among the thirty-six, eight chapters may be studied in the specific context of the art of communication. The chapters are : VIII - 'Acting of the Subordinate Parts of the Body'; IX & X - '*Abhinaya* of the Hands and of the Major Limbs'; XIII - 'The Stage Walk of Characters'; XV - 'Verbal Representation and Prosody'; XXIII - '*Aharya Abhinaya*'; XXIV - '*Samanya Abhinaya*' and XXVI - '*Abhinaya*'.

Chapter Eight begins with an elucidation of the semantics of *abhinaya*, translated as 'acting'. The sages ask Bharata the meaning of the term '*abhinaya*'. Replying to the query, Bharata expounds that the word '*abhinaya*' has the root '*ni*' which means 'to carry' with the preposition '*abhi*'

meaning 'towards'. In other words, acting, as *abhinaya* so implies, denotes a transfer of an essence, (Bharat terms it '*rasa*'), presumably from the actors on the stage to the audience around them. Bharat goes on to categorize *abhinaya* into four aspects - *angika* or 'physical acting'; *aharya* or 'make-up and costumes'; *vacika* or 'verbal'; *sattvika* or 'emotional'. Chapter Nine and Ten, often read conjointly, deals with the use of hands and limbs in acting. Importantly, Chapter Thirteen deals with the most common feature of any physical act on the stage, namely walking. Nuances to be communicated through walking are equally detailed and significant, with Bharata recommending that for the ordinary people steps with the length of one or two *talas* would be appropriate while that should be four in case of gods and kings. Chapter Fifteen begins with an important declaration regarding the use of words in a dramatic performance. Verses 1 - 3 has been translated as :

Words are based on vowels and consonants. One (an actor) should be very particular about words, because words are the body of dramatic art. Gestures, costumes and make-up, along with the expressions of emotions, are secondary as they only clarify the meaning of words. The *sastra*-s are made up of words; they depend on words; so there is nothing more important than the word. Word is the source (root) of everything.

Clearly, irrespective of what the myth of the origin of the *natya* may maintain, the traditional Vedic premise on the *vak* or the word as the primal source of all action, is maintained in the *Natyasastra* as well. Clearly, this would have been unavoidable in an age when the composer would be the first 'mover' of the *sastra* by both conceiving the matter of instruction as well as the mode of its representation. In terms of the scale of importance therefore we detect an unmistakable priority of the playwright in the art of dramatic representation. It is the playwright

who decides what is to be communicated and fashions the manner of communication through his words in speeches of characters and stage directions. Chapter twenty-three which deals with the appearance of the actors demarcates two critical modes of communication so important in any contemporary communication theory. The first is the issue of the immediate visual communication. For example, irrespective of what a character may speak, if he enters the stage wearing a crown, he would be immediately taken to be the king. Once the first layer of communication is conveyed, that impression is reinforced through subsidiary communication modes, such as manner of walking or speaking, use of characteristic words or expressions and conducting of certain rituals specific to a king. Chapter XXIV is interestingly titled '*Samanya Abhinaya*' and the term '*samanya*' has a remarkably rigorous definition. Bharata says:

*Samanya Abhinaya* depends on words (and their tone), physical gestures and *sattva* (emotions). When words, the tone and the gestures are suited to the emotion conveyed, it is *samanya* (where all the three are *samana* i.e., equal or suited to one another) *abhinaya*.

As illustrations, the chapter goes on to elaborate details of acting and behaviour patterns expected in situations which recur in a drama, for example, awaiting and welcoming a lover, speaking to him, treating a guilty lover, expressing jealousy and fear, addressing a loved person, addressing a person who is detested, etc. Clearly, the approach to *samanya abhinaya* is grammatical and even didactic; the implication being that the emotive part of the communication would be distorted or even disturbed if the recommended mannerisms are violated. How far this interfered with an actor's spontaneity during those times is a matter of conjecture beyond the scope of this paper. However, what remains unambiguous is the concern of Bharata to convey accurately with as little noise as possible what the playwright intended to communicate in the

first place. Chapter twenty-six deals with the miscellaneous aspects of acting which remained untouched in the previous chapters. In the chapter, Bharata isolates and analyzes the idea of *chitrabhinaya* - expressions through gestures specific and special to particular stage situations. For example, if an actor is to express himself as a reaction to something pleasant or unpleasant, he should remember that anything pleasant or happy is indicated by touching the limbs, by the thrill of the body; anything harsh (and unpleasant) also by similar gestures but by contracting the body as well.

Again when it comes to expression of joy an actor should express his joy by hugging himself, by smiling eyes and by few words (because words are not immediate, i. e., automatic reaction).

When he is angry, he should 'upturn his red eyes, bites his lips, breathes hard and his whole body shakes with agitation'. For a woman anger would be conveyed through tears in her eyes, trembling of her chin, quivering of her lips, shaking of her head, knitted eyebrows and discarding of garlands or ornaments. In the chapter on the success of production, the human factors isolated by Bharata are effectively factors which govern all successful communication. Bharata says that faults in a production include 'self-made faults like unnatural acting, wrong gestures, bad casting, loss of memory, speaking other actor's lines or a ludicrous cry to express distress, incongruence, falling down of head-gear, and laughing or crying too much, etc.' However, what stands out as a significant first in the history of Indian dramatic theory is Bharata's stress on the nature and characteristics of spectators in order that a dramatic performance may be considered successful. From verses 50-62 of Chapter twenty-seven, Bharata describes ideal spectators as under:

They should be of a good character, of quiet behaviour and learning, with a desire for good name, impartial, advanced in age; they should be experts in all six varieties of

*natya* and in the playing of four kinds of musical instruments; pure minded, not greedy, knowing the language and the dialects, having practical knowledge of arts and crafts and of four kinds of *abhinaya* and of *rasa* and *bhava* and also of rules of prosody and other *sastra*-s. One who is attentive, honest, able to argue and reason, who can detect a fault and (yet) be sympathetic - such a man is qualified to be a spectator.

The qualities recommended are ideal and no theatrical performance can have all the spectators with such qualities. However, the insinuation is that a spectator with the qualities can be best placed to understand and absorb all the nuances or '*rasas*' which are meant to be communicated in the course of a performance.

However, no communication can transfer all nuances with the desired intensity under all circumstances. There can be instances, as Abhinavagupta's commentary on Bharata's *Natyasastra* shows, 'layers' of communication, some intended and purposive while others unintended, accidental or even random, that is carried to a spectator. Abhinavagupta begins his commentary with an interesting case. he says :

On hearing a sentence of scripture such as “They held a sacrificial session through the night,” or “He offered up [the oblation] into the fire,” a qualified individual—that is, someone who has the necessary wealth and meets the other prerequisites—has at first a bare comprehension, if one that carries the persuasive power of historical eventfulness. But thereupon a certain surplus comprehension arises, of the nature of a set of grammatical transformations whereby the original tense is suppressed and he thinks, “Let *me hold* a session,” or “Let *me offer* up”. This sort of comprehension is identified by various terms of art depending on the philosophical school, such as “intellection”,



“production”, “commandment”, “injunction”, and the like. In precisely the same way, from literary language there arises for the qualified individual a surplus comprehension.<sup>7</sup>

He refers to a 'surplus' comprehension that is initially not intended by either the playwright or the actor but is generated in due course of the performance under the influence of the individual spectator's intellectual sympathies. Such a 'surplus' however is not always an ideal communication set-up. The 'intellection' may run counter to the intended message of the communication and act as a noise in the '*abhi-naya*'. The idea of a noise in any dramatic communication has been highlighted in many commentators on Bharata's treatise for a significantly extended period of Sanskrit dramaturgy. For example, the tenth century AD text - *Dasarupa* - (Treatise on the Ten Forms of Drama) - by Dhananjaya , while professing to be a commentary on Bharata, categorizes various forms of drama, actors, stagecraft, emotions and the means of expressing them in the immediate context of the tenth century Sanskrit drama. The author of the treatise was alive to the concept of *rasantara* in Verse 69 of the fourth book, which implies a substitution of the originally communicated or evoked *rasa* in the course of the performance.<sup>8</sup> While the author is silent on the methodology of the substitution, it is apparent that he was alive to the problem of a *rasa* generating a different contextual meaning in an individual spectator's mind.

The term '*sadharanikaran*', having its origin in the *Natyasastra* has attained contemporary relevance in the context of communication largely due to the roots - *saha* - meaning 'same' or 'identical' and *dharan* - meaning 'to get'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the concept can be extended to include a dramatic performance as an attempt at achieving 'sameness' between the actors on the stage and the audience. If the attainment of a *rasanubhava* is the aim of the actors and the spectators alike,

as Bharata so emphatically asserts, it is significant that that the final attainment is said to come as a culmination of a series of successful transition of stages. Everything begins with *vibhava* or the cause (*karana*), the main stimulating cause being termed as *alambana vibhava* (the determinant), and, the environmental factors that are additional causes termed as *uddipana vibhava* (excitant). *Anubhava* is the consequent physical reaction through action, word and facial expression that follows (*anu*), as the impact of the *vibhava*. The thirty-three *vyabhichari bhavas* are transitory emotions based on psychological states of the mind of the individual audience. Several such emotions follow one after the other, though not always replacing the other, strengthening the *sthayibhava* of each stage, till the final, collective *sthayibhava* is established and there is *rasanubhava*. What Bharata means by *vyabhichari bhava* is veritably the 'noise' that impedes, distorts or even prevents communication from the stage. The attainment of the *saha* or 'sameness' has an unmistakable nuance special to any communication set-up, the implication of the need to attain 'sameness' hinting at a potentially unstable state of emotional or epistemological existing in the relation between the actors on the stage and the audience witnessing a performance.

If Bharata's *Natyasastra* and the commentaries that followed the treatise are studied in the context of the stage as a communication arrangement, it follows that the treatise and the critical commentaries on it are essentially attempts to fine-tune the art of communication. The issue attains a degree of sophistication since the targeted audience is heterogeneous with each individual having disparate intellectual and emotional abilities to act as recipients in the discourse. While Bharata does not discount the possibility of a communication arrangement going wrong, the elaborate designs, both verbal and visual, are meant to bring failure in communication to the minimum. It has been mentioned earlier that one of the ostensible purpose

for the art of dramaturgy being brought to the earth for all mortals, according to Bharata, is the need for instruction. Clearly *siddhi* or success of the production would depend as much on the 'grammar' of the stagecraft as also on the extent to which the apparent disequilibrium in the 'actors - play - audience' arrangement that exists before a production are brought to a minimum in the course of the dramatic action. Judged in this context Bharata's *Natyasastra* is a treatise on communication that has retained a contemporary relevance since the art of communicating to a heterogeneous target is as much a challenge in communication theory today as it was during the classical age of Sanskrit drama.

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5. Panini refers to the *nata-sutra-s* - guides for *nata-s* - in his *Ashtadhyayi*, IV.3.110.
6. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from *natyasastra* follow the 4th edition of the translation of Adya Rangacharya, published by Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 2003.
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8. *The Dasarupa - A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy*, by Dhananjaya. Trans. George Haas, New York : Columbia University Press, 1912.

9. 'Sadharanikaran' has been conceived of as a specialized model of communication specific to the contexts of classical Indian sociology and hermeneutics. See 'The Sadharanikaran Model and Aristotle's Model of Communication - A Comparative Study' (2008), *Bodhi : An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Department of Languages and Mass Communication*, Kathmandu University. vol. 2(1) : 268-289.