

# Communication and the Non-Verbal

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Drama like all arts is intended to communicate. Two modes of communication are chiefly utilized in it, verbal and non-verbal. The verbal mode is distinguished by its reliance on word/language as they are conventionally understood. On the other hand the non-verbal mode includes a number of channels such as gestures, movements, stances and postures. In addition days are not far when recourse to the non-verbal may bring into play other sense-modalities e.g. the tactile, olfactory etc. Application of these latter sense-modalities in dramatic communication is not entirely absent today as is borne out by many ritualistic features detected in the performing tradition. However, their role is limited and it rarely indicates a conscious use. Today it is desirable to pay more attention to the non-verbal because, for various reasons, it seems destined to carry heavier burden in theatre communication. Some of the reasons for the ascendancy enjoyed by the non-verbal need to be noted.

Firstly, directors, actors and even playwrights have become aware of the limitations characterising linguistic communication. Speech-sounds, sentence-structures, prosodic moulds and in fact the 'drama-text' itself has become suspect as far as the capacity to express the inner layers of the sophisticated and complex reality of the modern man is concerned. The repeated use of the idiom, forms or styles of the folk category in the modern theatre could be interpreted as an open indictment of language and the linguistic as expressive channels of theatric content. It is frequently pointed out that the abundant use of cries, groans, grunts, laughter, tears and the like should essentially serve as a reminder of the inadequacy the verbal channels display in meeting the challenges of the new theatre situation.

Secondly, there is a marked change in the physical and external conditions under which contemporary dramatic communication takes place. On account of the improved lighting, sound-projection and the overall presentation facilities much more is heard and seen with greater ease, fidelity and detail.

Thirdly, the total media framework (of which theatre is a part) has undergone qualitative changes in two respects, the viewing set and the viewer-viewed relationship. Group-viewing is on the wane, audience as an integrated body of persons coming

together with similar intent has been replaced by isolated intent, and individual viewers (who may or may not interact with each other). Further, the viewer-viewed form a very narrow circle today. The widespread use of the cinematic technique has enslaved the present-day viewer to visual and aural minutiae consequent to a purposeful presentation of isolated details by all media irrespective of their own natural equipment. As a cumulative effect, the expectations of the audience are geared to receive subtler, sophisticated and highly controlled presentations replete with nuances. As language has been already devalued as a carrier of suggestive, subtle content capable of reflecting the complexity of the contemporary reality, the non-verbal has become a compulsory feature, employed as well as expected. The demand for it is no longer a matter of fashion and it can hardly be condemned as a craving for the exotic. The non-verbal answers an inner necessity. More importantly, the necessity touches a matter of substance and not of mere external form or technique.

What is communication? Simply stated it is a process in which an idea, feeling or a thought is conveyed by one or more persons to other receiving persons. (We are of course confining the discussion to human beings placed in a specific situation, namely dramatic.) What happens when communication takes place successfully? One major consequence, suggested by the core meaning of the term, is creation of something common between the initiator and the receiver of the communication. The 'common' in its turn is something which belongs equally to two or more. Thus to assert that art must communicate is to stress its property to bring about a sense or an experience of equality.

For a performer the most important step would be to grapple with the 'how'-aspect of the 'non-verbal'. The mode seems to present an infinite number of possibilities. It consists of innumerable variables which lack denotation i.e. a power of specific reference. In addition, non-verbal manifestations possess a singularly unpredictable quality of springing up even without an intentional effort on the part of the actor! This is the reason why improvisation, a major feature of 'art'-acting, occurs in this mode to a great extent. Scores of directors and actors have testified to the fact that mannerisms, gestures, inflections and such other less structured manifestations of acting appear on 'inspiration'. Observation, imitation, recalling from memory, 'fixing' and/or 'marrying' images from diverse sensory fields are some of the strategies employed by performers to strengthen and explore non-verbal resources. India boasts of a long dramatic tradition as well as a training tradition crystallised so thoroughly in *Natyashastra*. It would therefore be interesting to have a look at the Indian context.

In general Bharata's approach is to launch a two-pronged attack on the problems posed by dramatic communication. On the one hand he deals with the

psychological processes involved. Almost in the same breath the performance-oriented theoretician also describes the physical-physiological correlates of the mental states he has dealt with. Finally the overall effort is oriented to ensure communication of the dramatic content to the receiver i.e. the audience.

Bharata's exposition on the non-verbal, which fits snugly in his entire scheme, could be rearranged to facilitate our understanding.

Bharata's overall communicative model (with special reference to the non-verbal) envisages at the first level the trinity of bhava, vibhava and anubhava.

Bhava is any alteration in mental state. The term is to be understood as a causative because bhava brings about the poetic content through words, gestures etc.

It should be obvious that some agency will be required to cause this initial ripple on the still waters of the mind. Bharata's vibhava takes care of it. Vibhava is an outside stimulus or determinant which causes bhava in an actor.

Finally, an actor as a performer has to respond to the stimuli in order to make the bhavas perceivable to the audience. Bharata states that anubhava i.e. the actor's responses to the vibhava through words, gestures, movement etc. carry out the task. He goes on to add that both vibhava and anubhava are known to the common people and that anubhava is to be connected with the flourish of hand-gestures as well as gestures of the major and minor limbs of the body. Bhava is not ascribed to the common man because in the dramatic context it is specifically related to conveying of the poetic content. Vibhava and anubhava being features of the ordinary human behaviour, are not codified at the initial stage. In other words the bhava-vibhava-anubhava model represents a general model in need of further refinement and narrowing-down to answer specific demands made by dramatic modalities and acting processes. This is achieved at the second level when Bharata discusses abhinaya.

Four kinds of abhinaya appear at this level. They are: vachika (recitation and delivery of speech), angika (movement and gestures of the major and minor limbs), aharya (the use of make-up, costume, jewellery, weapons, stage-props etc) and sattvika (the psycho-physical, non-verbal basic states numbering eight). It is to be noted that three kinds of abhinaya namely, angika, aharya and sattvika are in the non-verbal mode. Of the three, the aharya would be expected to operate as an external stimulant i.e. vibhava. Angika would belong to the category of the anubhava. However, the dramatic orientation entails their specialised use. This is the reason why Bharata does not treat the anubhava exhaustively but builds an elaborate structure for the aharya and

the angika. For example, in angika the human body is initially subjected to a threefold division. After carrying out a further division of the body into six major and minor limbs, Bharata goes on to describe and classify: 13 head movements, 36 glances, 9 eye-lid movements, 7 eyebrow movements, 6 movements each of the nose, lower-lip chin, 9 neck movements and four-fold facial expressions! To say the least Bharata's enumeration is an astonishing feat of observation and cataloguing! Bharata could be applauded for having written the first manual of the non-verbal dramatic communication as each of the non-verbal manifestations is correlated to a brief but specific psychological state. It is a pity that this 'vocabulary' has not been consciously introduced into dramatic training.

However, the most intriguing aspect of Bharata's statement on the non-verbal is the un-codified sattvika abhinaya. According to him sattva is the essence of the human body. It is the fundamental human condition. Bhava, the initial disturbance of the mind or the later more artistic manifestations depend on the sattva. Having made this basic premise Bharata takes the step of touching on the kind of abhinaya step born out of sattva. The sattva, invisible in itself, becomes manifest in eight ways namely, paralysis, perspiration, horripilation, voice-breaking, tremor, change of colour, tears or fainting. These external and bodily expressions are comprehensible as states though they lack denotation unlike the other non-verbal items in the angika abhinaya. Matters are further complicated when Bharata states that the sattvika denotes a mind in equilibrium e.g., a mind which is fully concentrated and undistracted. Thus, the sattvika is psycho-physical to the core. It is to be remembered that for bhava the mind merely registers a directional activity but for the sattva the mind needs to attain a qualitative state basic to all artistic communication. Consequently, the eight specific non-verbal manifestations in sattvika abhinaya become the most ambiguous and therefore the most potent. It is significant that the eight sattvika bhavas are not codified unlike the angika.

The third level at which Bharata's model of dramatic communication operates is the ultimate step of rasa-nishpatti, the enjoyment of the dramatic performance by the guidance and success of the actors in bringing it about. When Bharata enumerates the non-verbal ways in which the audience registers its approval/disapproval of the performance, it is as if a logical circle is completed! Nothing less could have been expected of so thorough a thinker as Bharata!