

Speech: A Genetic Plan of Abhinaya

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(Published in Facts & News, No 17, NCPA, Theatre Development Centre, Mumbai, May 1990)

It is more than twenty years now since I held the first workshop in Voice and Dramatic Speech. Each of the workshops has created in my mind a chiaroscuro effect of enthusiasm and reluctance. The eagerness of the participants has never failed to impress on me the need to go deeper into the discipline. However, I have been consistently forced to peg down efforts at the level of voice and speech, while my ambition is to work with them at the level of *vachika abhinaya*! This seems to be an auspicious moment to draw attention to this peculiar situation in theatre training because attempts to rationalize theatre-training are in the air. Many government and non-government agencies are eager to chalk-out programmes for theatre-training and allocate funds. Senior theatre-personalities are inclined to share their expertise with the not-so-seniors. And in the wings are the foreign experts waiting to inform, communicate, co-operate and co-produce! With the N.S.D. forced into a painful passivity, it is opportune to think seriously about each aspect of theatre-training. My comments are restricted to voice and speech and related matters.

Today the trainees enrolling for the workshop are engaged on the amateur stage either independently or as stable members of a group. Quite a few manage to shuttle between stage and the television. Occasionally some of them also appear on the professional/commercial stage. The point to note is that all these tenuous affiliations seem to have a direct effect on the use of voice and speech (and in fact on the entire theatric behaviour) of the new talent. For example, most of the groups display an experimentalism which is unfortunately predictable as well as detrimental to a theatre-person's sensitivity to voice and speech! An instance is the readiness of the amateur groups to opt for translations/adaptations of the Anglo-American neo-moderns, Indian folk-styled presentations, plays permeated with dark emotionalism and finally for events depicting some kind of violence. Dramatic performances with such origins inevitably reject linguistic/stylistic facility, abundance of imagery and variety of expression. The groups consequently have failed to evolve a body of coherent norms about speech in general as also about the more technical aspects of speech such as voice-orchestration, speech-analysis and creative use of vocal parameters. The matter becomes all the more complicated when the concerned performer is free-lancing

because a free-lancer is compelled to adjust without getting any insight into the process/philosophy demanding the adjustment. At one point of time many trend-setting journals in different traditions used to frame guidelines of style etc. and insist on an intelligent adherence to them. In performing arts such norms or guidelines exist though they may be unwritten. Such critical crystallizations help performers by providing a reference-base. For example, till the fifties speech was expected to be audible and intelligible while voice was to have a marked capacity to traverse higher pitch-ranges with ease and frequency. It is helpful to remember that a firm_ tradition helps acts of conformity as well as of deviation because one can only conform to and deviate from something securely in place! One can hardly be expected to deviate from or conform to a conceptual quicksand! The new talent's voice and speech flounder with pathetic innocence in the jungle of possibilities extended to them by the sophisticated audio-visual equipment and the potential of efficient recording systems. (Fortunately for them the latter are hardly used efficiently!) The pitches are purposelessly shooting up and down, intensities are employed without judgement and timbres obviously pose endless puzzles! The un-doubted truth is that the hasty and unprepared forays into the three worlds of abhinaya have reduced the new talents to struggling victims caught in a media-vortex!

Perhaps an equally serious shortcoming of the new talent is their lack of sensitivity to beauties of language as a considerably evolved and comprehensive tool of communication. Questions of their own personal linguistic weaknesses apart, their responses to nuances in speech-situations indicate disturbing and discernibly slow reflexes. To put it differently, they cannot, on their own, detect a potentially evocative sound, word, phrasing or a longer language-construction. The saving grace is that most of them can feel the presence of a certain quality in speech-situations when it is pointed out to them, but they can rarely identify the source of the qualitative contribution. This is the reason (or at least one of the reasons) why there is, in their own performances, an element of chance disproportionate to the scope and requirement of the roles they create. They recognize excellence but post facto, and cannot see it coming. It is an aesthetic truism to say that to be an artist is to anticipate!

This is not the occasion to go into the reasons responsible for the state of affairs. But in view of the all-over-felt necessity of making the audience's/spectator's/viewer's life more quality-oriented it may be desirable to suggest a few remedial measures.

Firstly, the new talent must be encouraged to adopt a self-learning strategy which accepts existence of classics. It needs to be emphasized that no classic has been

exhausted by its ancientness! In fact there happen to be modern classics because the other two connotations of the term namely 'outstanding' and 'typical' complete the application of the term. A classic role in the present context is a role performers need to study because the role is a model of excellence and not because an opportunity to do it is at hand. A performer who professes interest in aesthetic achievements must free himself from the vice-like grip of the 'assignment-culture' sweeping all over the theatre world. He must find time, energy and the will to identify, study and recreate classic roles because they present opportunities to train, sensitize and align his responses to a variety of artistic stimuli.

Secondly all attempts must be made to propagate the truth that the performing India consists of many autonomous states and that cultural cartography in India demands a remapping of the country into many self-expressive and yet mutually complementary federal units. Therefore regional language-theatres must be strengthened and the pan-Indian talk and action (at all levels in performing arts) must be allowed only in deserving cases. No expression with the credo of realism (in various garbs), representational core (in a majority of cases) and the compulsion to convey messages can hope to enjoy the luxury of a pan-Indian ambition so early in its career. After all, the stage-play in India is yet to enjoy its bicentenary! It is not a coincidence that only music transcends regional boundaries and enjoys zonal expanses (while dance too seems to follow the pattern of the stage-play to a great extent).

Finally our directors and critics! They stand in immediate judgement on the performers and hence need to be emphatically told that the spoken word (or the unspoken but suggested word) is a different commodity because it is a part of the larger phenomenon, namely the vachika abhinaya. It is a sad fact that many a contemporary director suffers from qualitatively indifferent understanding of theatric speech while many a critic knows next to nothing about the transformation a written word undergoes when spoken. The directors do not know how to effect the transformation and the critics fail to sense the difference, perhaps because the written word has been their staple diet! In the aspect of speech the directors seem to be so unsure that they begin theorizing about the non-importance of speech in theatre! At their best they try to compensate through a better use of other technical aspects. Speech needs to be treated as a genetic plan of the total abhinaya. It is time we learn to decipher the spoken word properly. In the land of oral tradition to plead for the legitimacy of speech is, to say the least, ironical!