

The role of Theatre as a Medium of Communication

Neelesh Pandey

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 in the dynamic world where day by day people learnt from society by these tools and this is true of the theatre as well. In the early time theatre playing a virtual role to provide the information to the societies which were interlink with removal of social abuses or some running experiences of the society. 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.

Key Words: Theatre, Communication, Information,

Introduction

A concoction of vivid cultures impacting the people, their mien, vantage, credence and lifestyle – that is what Indian culture is about. Indian culture has travelled through several eras and has adopted a lot from them. It is not just about following some traditions, it is about the sense of belonging and homage to the civilization which was once represented by our ancestors. The culture you live in, gives you a distinct identity not just by means of how you celebrate festivals, dress up, or perform rituals, but also by your day today activities and the way you live. Even before the first family drive in the new car, a Nariyal-Nimbu is cracked open in front of it, deviating it from the road to any mishap; to start a new venture, a Muhurat or auspicious time is determined so that it prospers; Dahi-Peda is taken on the very first day of the new job or examination to ensure all goes fine; touching feet of elderly to seek their

Aashirwaad or blessings; all this constitutes Indian culture. Some people stay true blue about it while some find it imposed.

Indian tradition of theatre is rich and evolved with the ancient rituals and seasons of the country. It is believed that Lord Brahma created Natyaveda, the fifth Veda on Natya (action) as a mode of recreation for all class of the society by incorporating words from Rig Veda, music from Sama Veda, action from Yajur Veda and emotion from Adharva Veda. Sage Bharata who perfected the dramatic art and wrote Natya Shastra, a great comprehensive work on the science and technique of Indian drama, dance and music enacted the first drama to the audience of 'Devas'. Through the medium of drama, common man was presented with the Ithihasas, Puranas, and Mythology.

Indigeneous tradition as well as modern research traces the origin of Indian drama to the Vedas. In the Ramayana we hear of drama troupes of women while Kautilyas Arthshastra mentions musicians, dancers and dramatic shows. Drama is a performing art, which has also been practised since times immemorial. Drama could spring from a child's play. The child enacts mimics, and caricates which was definitely the beginning of drama.

Since early times mythological stories of war between the gods, goddesses and the devils is known. Bharata wrote Natyashastra and created the plays known as Asura Parajaya and Amrit Manthan. Natyashastra is one of the greatest texts written in the field of drama and other performing arts.

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 *Nāṭyasāstra*. The *Nāṭyasāstra* 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*' meaning 'towards' and '*ni*' meaning 'to 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 come 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).

India has a longest and richest tradition in theatre going back to at least 5000 years. The origin of Indian theatre is closely related to ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the country. Bharata's Natya Shastra (2000 BC to 4th Century AD) was the earliest and most elaborate treatise on dramaturgy written anywhere in the world. The traditional account in Bharata's Natya Shastra gives a divine origin to Indian Theatre, attributing it to the Natyaveda, the holy book of dramaturgy created by Lord Brahma.

In Natya Shastra, Bharata Muni consolidated and codified various traditions in dance, mime and drama. Natya Shastra describes ten classifications of drama ranging from one act to ten acts. No book of ancient times in the world contains such an exhaustive study on dramaturgy as Natya Shastra. It is addressed to the playwright, the director, and the actor because, to Bharata Muni these three were inseparable in the creation of a drama. The Sanskrit word for drama, nataka, derives from the word meaning "dance". In traditional Hindu drama, expression was achieved through music and dancing as well as through acting, so that a play could be a combination of opera, ballet and drama.

Living traditions occupy a prominent place in the Indian social system. Any living tradition has a natural flow. There can be no doubt about the fact that traditional art forms reflect the ideals of the society, its determination to survive, its ethos, emotions, fellow-feelings, and so

on. Drama in itself is a complete form of arts. It includes in its framework acting, dialogue, poetry, music, etc.

In community living, the art of singing has its own importance. In all the traditional theatre-forms, songs and the art of singing have an important role to play. Traditional music of the theatre is an expression of the feelings of the community.

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.

Command or instructive function

The main 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. The Modern era in Theatre came during the rule of the British as a source of their entertainment. The idea of Realism started seeping in from the West and theatres were based on London models. Post-Independence nationalism was intertwined with this art. The Modern Theatre was given a new shape, colour and flavour. The year 1972 turned out to be a landmark for the Indian vernacular theatre when Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi play 'Ghashiram Kotwal' made waves by its brilliant use of traditional folk forms in modern contemporary theatre. This led to the birth of a new breed of directors.

Of course the advent of Indian Cinema proved detrimental to the Theatre. Nowadays there are hardly any eminent theatre personalities who have dedicated themselves solely to theatre.

Theatre people have to keep some ties with Cinema to survive financially. But we can't let this culture die. It's one of the oldest sources of entertainment and we should resurrect it from its ruins. Catch a play at your nearest Theatre centre and be a part of your country's glorious history.

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

And another 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. Communication embodies an important human behaviour and helps in the process of Social, Political and Cultural transformation of a society. Each and every society around the world evolves its own appropriate systems of Communication to perform the function of societal transformation which ultimately gave birth to various performing arts. In this process, tradition plays a vital role to create the artistic processes the indigenous tools of human communication.

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. 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 fulfillment, 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)

Educational theatre and drama practitioners have believed in the efficacy of their work for a long time, but until now it has rarely been measured with scientific tools. In the international EU-supported project called DICE (“Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education”), several dozen educational theatre and drama practitioners from twelve countries (Hungary, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Norway, Palestine, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden and United Kingdom), with the widest theoretical and professional background, have allied forces with academics (psychologists and sociologists), to measure the impact of educational theatre and drama through a cross-cultural research study investigating the effects of educational theatre and drama on five of the eight Lisbon Key Competences.

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

Development media theory which relates to media structures and performance in developing societies provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding the relationship between theatre and development. This is because the theory encompasses what Folarin (1998) described as a great variety of socio-cultural, economic and political condition which borders on the effective use of the media for development purpose. Specifically, the theory considers the role of the media in society as essential target at stimulating and sustaining societal development in such area as cultural, social economic, political and technological development. The theory also advocates a situation where the media (theatre as one) should accept and help in carrying out the special development task of national integration, socio-economic modernization, promotion of illiteracy and cultural creativity (Folarin 1998). The 'Reflective-Projective' theory of Broadcasting and Mass Communication by Leo Loevinger presents a similar position. The theory provides yet another basis for understanding the relationship of theatre and development. Leovinger position is that the media 'mirrors the society' and that while the media themselves reflects society as organized group, individual audience members project their own individual reflections into images presented. This is where the saying among theatre scholars that 'theatre is a creator's mirror of the whole universe' and the popular dictum 'the world is a stage where everyone plays his or her own part and leaves' finds justification.

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.

Theatre as an old form of Communication is a deep - rooted tradition in India’s vibrant culture. Folk Theatre is a composite art in India with a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic and ballad recitation, graphic and plastic arts, religion and festival peasantry. The Folk theatre having roots In native culture, is embedded in local identity and social values besides providing mass entertainment helped Indian society as indigenous tools of interpersonal, inter - group and inter - village communication for ages.

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.

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Neelesh Pandey is PhD Research Scholar at Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, Central University of Orissa, Koraput and may be reached at neeshpan@gmail.com