

Process of Transformation of 'I' into 'We': Critical Study of Communication Behaviour of Spectator-Performer Relationship in Theatre

Yogita Swami

Abstract--- *The inter-relationship of actor and the audience has always affected the theatre activity in terms of space, action, structure, and so on. Many a times it has motivated to evolve new methods for better communication with a definite object. The circle of communication for transfer of the dramatic material from the sender – the author of the material, to the receiver – the audience, and its feedback to the author again through the reactions and criticism, has always been a very complicated journey with several layers of human nature. The process of encoding and decoding from both the ends, that is, the sender at one end, and the receiver at the other end, involves many levels of interpretation of the text during this transfer, which ultimately proves to be a deciding factor for the assessment of the actor-audience relationship during ‘those’ moments of happening on the dramatically charged space. The interaction of these groups – the sender and the receiver, or the groups of actors and the spectators – provide a more creative ground when they seem to be standing at the same level of experience and understanding during the course of their interaction.*

Keywords--- *Communication Behaviour, Performance, Spectator, Natyashastra.*

I. PROBLEM OBJECTIVES

The research in question has interrogated the complex relationship of actor and the performer, which, in fact, is process of transformation of an individual into a group identified as 'audience'. The research has also underlined the thin line between the group behaviour and the crowd behaviour inside the auditorium. The research has also underlined the group dynamics created during a performance and its impact on the performer. The historical perspective of the classical Sanskrit theatre and the communication process defined by Bharat Muni, the creator of Natyashastra and its relevance in modern times has also been examined.

II. INTRODUCTION

The glamour, the elan of theatre is the product of the behaviour pattern of performer and spectator groups. Theatre lives through the exchange between them. Describing the character of the process of this happening Eric Bantley says that,

“ The theatre space sets up vibrations in those who frequent its certain properties roughly suggested by the term magic or invisibly attributed to the building itself. If there is something about the place, there is something too, about its inhabitants, the actors.... There is something about an audience – that is, a group of people in close proximity, with their attention – their eyes, ears, hearts and minds focus upon a single object. There is something

Yogita Swami, Research Scholar, School of Media and Communication at Manipal University.

about ceasing to be merely an 'I' and becoming under such circumstances, in this place, before the actor, a part of 'we'.¹ (Bantley, 1969).

The complications of this typical relationship have always been a matter of inquiry and explanation since the early stage of the history. Bharata providing a detail discussion about the subject in *Natyashastra*, whenever refers to the actors and spectators, often perceives them as ideal – what it would have them be to qualify as actors and spectators. Philosophically the communication in theatre, as analyzed in *Natyashastra*, is conceptual, a speculation about 'ideal', and not necessarily a 'description' of what happens in reality – and so, its actors and spectators are often 'ideals'. But, at the same time, there is mixing of 'facts' and 'ideals', commonly seen in theatre. With this point of view about reality, Bharata talks about the 'real' actors and 'real' spectators also along with the 'ideals'. The *Natyashastra* places an in-depth idea of various methods for 'ideal' communication for actors at one hand, and methods to judge ideal acting, for spectators and critics at the other hand. Explaining further he says that, these methods help both the groups to attain the state of '*charmanand*'; in other words, the state of 'ultimate enjoyment', which could be defined as

'Common level of experience and understanding between the two vital factors of a performance.'² (Kale, 1974)

Pramod Kale has described the state of common plane of thought process as an essential condition for mass communication in its desired perspective. He takes his ideas from old Sanskrit treatise of Bharata's *Natyashastra*, which define the act of "abhinaya" in a contrast to the concept of "acting" popular in the western world. Analyzing the Sanskrit word 'abhinaya', Bharata explains its meaning. According to him

The act of 'abhinaya' is an act of 'carrying it in forward direction'. In other sense this is a conveyance, which carries the dramatic material in progression instead of an act of mere 'imitation. The dramatic material or the 'kavya' should grow further through 'abhinaya, and should reach to the audience in a developed form. With this explanation he underlines the importance of actor as 'abhineta'. The word is the composition of 'abhi', that is 'in forward direction'; 'ne' means to carry; and 'neta' means 'who carries'. Bharata has laid down several rules, regulations and principles for driving this carriage and to handle the conveyance in a very scientific and logical way, however, he also underlines the importance of feedback, reaching back to the poet and the performer.ⁱ (Unni, 1998)

Bharata has applied this principle in theatrical performance. According to him the *Kavya*, or the dramatic material needs to be encoded through the *prayog* for its success, which he calls '*siddhi*'.ⁱⁱ This process of encoding the poetry is in fact the process of discovering the meaning, the philosophical layers, the interpretative depths, and the emotional under currents of the poem in performance through experimentation. At the climax of the performance, the *Rasa*, or the taste is communicated in its saturated form to the audience; the poem is called decoded as the *Arth* in its real sense is communicated. The varied and balanced use of various parts of this experiment like assemblage, speech, body, spirit creates an environment for the performance.

III. PROCESS OF COMMUNICATIVITY

Actor audience relationship and the process of communicativity could be clarified by explaining the relationship of the various aspects and stages of *Rasa* theory as given by Bharata. The composition of various emotions and sentiments work as a means of encoding the written text into a visual manifestation of the written text which are

carried by the actor/s on the stage towards the targeted audiences, which is at the receiving end. The success of this communication much depends on the relationship developed between the sender and the receiver. Undoubtedly, the inter-relationship of actor and the audience has always affected the theatre activity in terms of space, action, structure, and so on. Many a times it has motivated to evolve new methods for better communication with a definite object. The circle of communication for transfer of the dramatic material from the sender – the author of the material, to the receiver – the audience, and its feedback to the author again through the reactions and criticism, has always been a very complicated journey with several layers of human nature. The process of encoding and decoding from both the ends, that is, the sender at one end, and the receiver at the other end, involves many levels of interpretation of the text during this transfer, which ultimately proves to be a deciding factor for the assessment of the performer-audience relationship during ‘those’ moments of happening on the dramatically charged space. The interaction of these groups – the sender and the receiver, or the groups of actors and the spectators – provide a more creative ground when they seem to be standing at the same level of experience and understanding during the course of their interaction. However, as a matter of fact, it is not necessary that two performances of a play are same, which is otherwise possible in other art forms. In fact, there is a rare chance of their being alike, mainly because of actors and spectators – the two important factors of theatrical event who are rarely in the same mood and often try to influence each other, like the unpredictable creatures.

This is, of course different theory from the conventional definitions of inter-personal communication or mass communication, which has been a continuous exercise to understand the common agreeable level. The process of defining communication is very complex as the communication itself is a hard process. Each person, who thinks seriously about it brings a different perspective to the task. The process could be viewed in many ways, each providing a different point of view. According to S.S Stevens

*"Communication is the discriminatory response of an organism to a stimulus"*ⁱⁱⁱ

(Stevens, 1976).

In this definition, the process of communication is supposed to be different from person to person, who determine their own way to correspond and to respond, while on the other hand Dean Barnlund defines communication

"as an effort after meaning, a creative act initiated by man in which he seeks to discriminate and organize quos, so as to orient to himself in his environment and satisfy his changing need"^{iv} (Dean Barnlund, 1968).

This definition emphasizes upon environment which decides the course of communication. Some of the definitions underline the human process to make sense out of the world and the desire to share their sense with others (Masterson, 1983)^v. The transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills etc., by the use of symbols is considered to be a communication by (Barnard Berelson, 1964)^{vi}. These definitions are exploring various aspects in conformity and contradicting to each other. Therefore it becomes difficult to reach at one acceptable conclusion. The situation in an auditorium or a theatre hall is different where the process of mass communication takes place at two different levels; in a theatre hall the source of communication is lies on the stage, which is transmitting the message to the group sitting in the front of stage that is 'auditorium'. This looks like a one way communication but it is not so

in reality as the people sitting in the hall may react to the message spontaneously, that might be appreciative or may be critical otherwise. However the conditions in a cinema hall are more metallic and one way, where the reaction of spectator does not affect the performance on the spot. The communication in theatre could be defined from modern point of view in a more realistic way as

"Communication is a process by which a source transmit a message to a receiver through some channel!"^{vii}
(Sarah Trenholm, 2004).

If we compare all these definitions, apparently the first definition is very broad, which talks about any kind of response by any living organism. This could be applied equally between living as well as non-living objects, for example, a plant seeking energy from sun or a person reading a book, sensing the presence of someone would be counted as communication. The second definition narrows the scope, focusing the attention on human beings, while the third definition underlines the process of sharing and transmitting the information to others. The fourth definition projects the importance of using symbols for communication. The last definition focuses on the means of transmission of messages and the concept of sender for initiating the communication. Analyzing all these definitions Sara Trenholm reaches to the conclusion that,

Communication is the process whereby humans collectively create and regulate social reality. The communications process is like a river: active, continuous, and flowing, never the same from one minute to the next. If we try to understand the river by analysing a bucket of water drawn from it, we are not studying the river as a whole, the same is true of communication. Individual sentences, words, or a gesture makes sense only we see them as part of an ongoing stream of events. We have to view communication as an ongoing process".^{viii}

According to Prof. Ravi Chaturvedi

"The process of communication in theatre is also a process converting an individual into a group of individual".^{ix} (Chaturvedi, 2005).

IV. GROUP DYNAMICS

We find that a person goes to see the performance is an individual in his own domain with a definite identity along with all his experiences, he has countered before entering into the auditorium, where he meets several people with same characteristics, who are about to be converted into a group of spectators in next few minutes, without knowing each other in most cases. Their thinking process, ideology, age group, educational background, profession etc. may not be same. There might be few small groups of family members, friends, colleagues etc., which do not communicate directly with each other but still has the same purpose common to all that is to enter into the hall, take their seats and watch the action of the performs/s on the stage. Technically these people will be receiving and waiting for the message in the form of physical action, dialog, speech, symbols, images etc., to be initiated by the performer, actor, dancer, singer etc. despite this multilayer differences, one thing always remain common that everybody prepares himself/herself psychologically to encounter a new environment for the coming performance, conically or sub conically. The warning of beginning the performance is an indication to everyone for standing on the jumping board which gives a jerk to the existing psychological behaviour and to enter into the new level of

group behaviour, this process is not a simple process since it is difficult for an individual to leave aside the psychological trait all of a sudden. We all know that almost every theatre performance or film projection starts with the sudden darkness in the hall, which creates an environment of natural intimacy without any prior information. This environment attracts the everybody's attention towards the stage, in other words this is first signal of change in the attitude and the behaviour, people get alert, stop talking to each other, taking care not to create any sound, which might distract the attention or create obstruction in the communication, at this point all communication is non-verbal, signaling and instructing each other silently to focus at one point which is soon going to be illuminated.

At this point when spectators convert into a group, there dynamics start operating. The group dynamics has some specific features which are clearly visible in the auditorium. The conformity is one of the most important aspect of group dynamics. According to Donald Lewis

"There is almost always considerable conformity among individual members of a group, they tend to talk alike, think alike, react alike and generally to behave alike. These similarity are usually striking and obvious"^x (Lewis Donald, 1963).

However the conformity up to certain extent is not bad, since even during this state of conformity, the individuals still have their personal point of views. But after certain point when personal point of are dissolved or pushed in the background, the group dynamics converts into the crowd behaviour, where people get together, reached to gather, touching each other's shoulders. During the performance, their reactions leave the surface of rationality. Their reaction gets emotionally charged, which can be felt in their boisterous laughter, tear shading cries, shouting with anger to the extent of heating the neighbour, clapping madly are the symptoms of crowd behaviour. Although behaving as a crowd, the audience in theater still cannot be determined as conventional crowd behaviour, defined by several psychologists. The psychological theories identified the crowd behaviour with its essential characteristics such as anonymity, where a person in a crowd thinks that they are large in numbers and are temporary. Generally the person as a part of a crowd behaves with a presumption that they do not know each other and feel immense powerful to allow him or her to act to instinct. In a same way suggestibility is another aspect of crowd behaviour, where people as a part of crowd suddenly appear to be highly responsive to the suggestions given by others, specially the leader of the crowd ' contagion' in a crowd quickly gets viral and passes from one person to another. Turner defines this aspect of crowd behaviour as 'interactional amplification' for example some people in the audience start clapping, motivates other to do the same thing. The crowd behaviour also has a specific feature of emotionality and impulsiveness. The elements of anonymity, suggestibility and contagion tend to arouse emotions, where inhibitions are given up and people become 'charged' to act. The crowd always is an unorganized group which totally lacks a structure. For example in theatre the people come together without any deliberation but some object of attention attracts each one of them. The focus of attention helps in the emergence of some kind of structure, which is not permanent or long lasting. The crowd behaviour is totally unpredictable, especially during the action, there could be a terrifying thing or may be some surprising actions. The member of the crowd act uncritically upon suggestions and their behaviour becomes quite unpredictable. The feeling of individuality does not exist in the crowd and people do not behave as an individual members. The personal restraints and sense of personal responsibility are completely lost.^{xi} (Mondal, Web article).

To summaries, the crowd behaviour is a temporary grouping without any rules, traditions and formal controls, since it is totally unstructured. It does not have any established patterns to be followed, the combination of these characteristics mix the behaviour extremely volatile, frightening and surprising as well. The audience could be defined as an institutionalized form of crowd.^{xiii} (Deeksha S, Web article) It is a passive crowd which is gathered in a performance, there might also be a face to face and shoulder to shoulder contact which can be witnessed in the street theatre performances. In an audience there is a definite and specific purpose where spectators want to watch the performance, where they meet at a predetermined time and place which is not found in a crowd, irrespective to the fact that there is an indirection among different members. According to Prof Ravi Chaturvedi.

The nature of contact between an audience and a crowd may be same but the contact is more in case of an action crowd. In an audience there is organization which works like an institution. But this is absent in an active crowd. Thus, even though the individual remain same, because of the differences in the characteristics of an audience and an active crowd, differences found their behaviour.^{xiii}(Chaturvedi, 2017)

During the course of historical development of the society, actors have performed many roles in the fall and rise of acting profession. Professionally, the actor has been a priest, a slave, a rogue, a vagabond at one hand, and an honoured citizen on the other hand. Artistically, he has been a conscience craftsman, and an established star. Socially, he has been a member of nobility, a king's favorite, and a disreputable outcast, and so on. One can find that the turbulent history of his profession, the actor has been all of these because his spectator has been slow to accept the acting profession as an honorable one, inconsistent in its support of the theatre, and limited in numbers who have been exposed to the joy of theatre going. Talking about the expectations from theatre and the image of actors and spectators Max Reinhardt says that,

“what I have in mind is a theatre that will again bring joy to people, that leads them out of the gray misery of everyday life, beyond themselves into a gay and pure atmosphere of beauty. I can feel that people are fed up with finding their own misery again in the theatre and that they are longing for brighter colours and a heightened sense of life.^{xiv} (Reinhardt, 2016)

Between Bharata and Rienhardt and further till date, there is a long chain of scholars, who time to time, have explained their 'expectations', 'images' and 'ideals' keeping this relationship in view. Their ideas and theories have influenced the performances and the relations also a lot, sometimes appearing as merely an expressive aspect of culture – reflecting people's beliefs about their community, or as an instrumental aspect of culture – showing people how they should behave. Commentators on drama as a form of mass communication have opted variously for either or both the descriptions.^{xv} (Goodlad, 1972) The process of defining the concept of relationship does not end here. The questions about the extreme polarity of the various forms of theatre have further been raised. Brecht puts them in his analysis, for example, that the

Theatre when becomes totally entertaining, it becomes absurd and clownish, but if it assumes the status of an instructor in isolation, it does not remain much effective.^{xvi} (Willett, 1966)

From thinker's point of view, as well as from *director* and aware spectator's ideas, the road of good and effective theatre passes through the middle of the high mountains of two distinct poles. There have been several supporters of

these two poles also in the course of history, who have defined the purpose of theatre time-to-time referring the social needs and the social behaviour. But, to my mind, especially when we make an effort to analyze the undercurrents of attitudes constituting the relationship of actor, or performer with the spectator, it is essential to understand the social structure of these relations. At one point at least, we can agree that the theatre and its activities provide an opportunity to the people for meeting and interacting. Hence, undoubtedly theatre is a social institution, which has certain rules of membership and a form of organization also like other social institutions, in order to serve a social purpose for which an institution emerges in the society. The wider community regulates the activities of this institution, which have a very closed theatrical community, by contracts and understandings. There are certain agreed practices, and traditions, which may or may not be legally binding, that regulate the transactions between a much closed community of performer and wide community of spectator. There are certain accepted expectations also from each other with a general understanding that the function of the purpose of the theatre is to put on plays for an audience to view passively. But this is not all. This cannot be the only possible view of the theatre's social role. But it is not easy either, to define the social purpose of the theatre, although, we can see some very simplistic definitions like, the 'purpose of the theatre is to educate' or 'to divert to entertain', and more recently 'to disturb'. In this perspective, the idea of Riechardt and the concept of Brecht indicate towards a more complicated picture of social structure as well as the role of the 'closed and 'wider' community of 'actors' and 'spectators'.

John Russel Brown defining the social role of theatre seems to be quite convincing. Of course, theatre's social role and function arise out of its relational interaction with the community. If the work produced is unacceptable, it will not have an audience, and if it continuously shows only what it knows, it will never grow, and for audience – it never advances. This situation cannot be an ideal for any social institution. Theatre, in this capacity, depends for its operation and support on a mesh of interrelationship between the actor and audience. The nature of this relationship gives the theatre at any particular historical time its special character, at such particular time when both the communities become one unit of same theatrical experience.^{xvii} (Brown, 1971)

When we talk about the actors and spectators becoming 'one unit', it is essential to keep in mind that the two performances of the same play, by the same group of actors may not be alike, but even then, the basic elements of their organization will remain the same. The performance may be sometime mechanical in one show due to some fatigue of actors, or because of their some kind of emotional problems, but on the next day it might be a fresh, vibrating and remarkable performance, although the basic composition of the production remains almost unchanged. However, this cannot be applied to the group of spectators, at times, which may be a mob, or a crowd, instead of intellectuals and art lovers, which essentially effects the performance. Therefore, the understanding of the audience behaviour is a must in the theatre.

V. AUDIENCE AS CROWD

This is a brief attempt to compare and contrast of a theatre audience with a crowd. Without going into the detail of psychological study of 'crowd' or 'mob', I want to refer the definitions given by Gustav Le Bon and E. D. Martin, who say that 'a gathering of human beings engrossed in a single collective experience' constitute into a 'crowd' or 'mob'.^{xviii} (Le Bon 2016) But certainly, this definition cannot be employed to the theatrical audience.

In a 'crowd', the individualities of persons gathered together almost wholly vanish, submerged in the totality of the group as a whole, irrespective to their being educated, ignorant, bold, vulgar, or refined, all tend to be leveled. The resultant crowd-spirit in general is lower and different from the sum total of its parts. Mob mentality generates a kind of temporary state of insanity by all going crazy together, which generally leads towards the brutal, the criminal, and the primitive absurd. The exercise of logic disappears and credulity dominates. At the same time, the passions are stimulated while intellectual arguments are not likely to make any appeal to the listeners. They are 'notoriously anesthetic towards the finer values of art, music and poetry'.^{xix} The unreal has almost as much influence on them as the real. They have an evident tendency not to distinguish between the two. Thus the marvelous and legendary make strong appeal. Mob, in its highly excited state, generally call for direct or indirect action. On occasion, it may sweep hysterically and confusedly towards a lynching, towards destruction of a hated object, or towards wanton havoc.

Keeping these salient features of the crowd in the foreground, when we consider about the theatre audience, we clearly find that the two are associated and yet they inhabit absolutely different realms. There are certain crowd qualities in audience, but in the atmosphere of the theatre, are so modified that they become something totally distinct. The audience, when caught up by a theatrical performance, becomes a unit, something more than a group of mere spectators. In the mob all intimate relationships between individual and individual vanish, while in the theatre these intimate relations are usually preserved within the audience's composite body. At the same time, if the audience attitudes are observed closely, it may be found that, like the crowd, the intellectual awareness definitely goes to lower level. With the mob, there is always the desire and call for action, but with the audience, there either is none, or ought to be none, as Allardyce Nicoll says.^{xx} (Nicoll, 1978) The man caught up in the crowd confounds the imaginary and the real, clamours for action; an audience may experience dominant emotions akin to those experienced by crowd, but as Le Bon observes, these emotions are not at once transformed into acts – because the most unconscious spectator cannot ignore that he is the victim of illusions, and that he has laughed or wept over imaginary adventures.

So finally, on the basis of the above analysis about the difference between a crowd and audience, a conclusion may be drawn that the audience has a spirit of its own which is dominated by emotions, and wishes to accept the make believe yet recognizes it as illusion, as well as, does not seek to make this make-believe a motive for action with all these inherent characteristics. It interacts with a theatrical performance, which is an art in-the-process-of-being-shaped, unlike to the other art forms, which are exposed only after getting shaped. There, a balance attitude of give-and-take relationship is required.

Although this balanced relationship of give-and-take is ideal situation in a theatrical performance, but the fact is that the emergence of electronic media has greatly affected the thinking pattern of the society as a whole and has enhanced the pace of social changes, changes in social attitudes and behaviour, which have evoked a series of serious questions for performer and its relation with the audience. It is not only exciting today, that the whole range of relationship within and without the theatre is being called into question, but the theatre itself is embarking on a path of violent and often drastic change. The performers have started to question the passive role of the audience in the modern society. Some of these questions relate to the basic characteristics of the theatre itself: whether it should

be something more than a presentation of some distant reality or it should be an event in its own right? Should the performance be an experience rather than illusion? Ought the audience to participate? Some questions are pointed out towards the relationship between actor and dramatist. Some of the questions even relate to the viability of any form of discrimination between actor and spectator and are producing 'happenings' and 'rituals' in which all who take part are participants.

VI. CONCLUSION

Today questions are being asked about the theatrical experience itself, such as: why do people go to the theatre at all? What happens when an audience identifies with a character on stage? Why this should be valuable, or enjoyable? Why throughout the history the theatre attracted heavier censorship than other art forms? What really happens when a theatrical performance takes place, and where does its potency lie? The most important questions are related to the theatre's relationship with the society, which are focused around some important issues like its social function and purpose, and its mode and ways to discharge its social responsibilities in the present time. The early escapist ideas are losing favour and some new concepts in this reference are being examined.

Today, the economic decline of theatre has forced it to go to the society, in the form of governmental agencies, to appeal for subsidies and grants. In order to justify these appeals, the theatre has to present a case to demonstrate its value to the society in the changed atmosphere, with a fresh verve, which ultimately forces every concerned person to look for new areas of actor-audience relationship study.

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