

UNDERSTANDING AN INDIAN PARADIGM OF ROLE THROUGH THEATRE

There are three seminal ideas in the Indian tradition on which we can base the concept of a role.

1. The concept of conception in the tradition
2. The ideas underlying Indian theatre
3. The structure of some individual *samskaras*

These three building blocks of our theory points to a paradigm where space and energy are the starting points. A role is a dynamic form. A person experiences a space that he calls his own within a context. A complex interplay of propensities, perceptions, abilities, inhibitions and fears energises and moves the form from within. This form interacts with energies in the context in the form of opportunities, invitations, threats and inhibitions. The role that a person plays in different situations is an outcome of this dynamic flow of energy.

The Paradigms :

1. **Conception :** A space is created which pulls together the sperm and the egg. Simultaneous with the meeting of the sperm and the egg, the spark of life enters the space. This spark of life (*prana*) carries with it traces of earlier births in a subtle form called *vaasana*. When these four elements come together, a new being is conceived. Growth and shaping occur when the being exchanges energy with its context. The seed is invested with a set of potentials. The nature of the psychological state of the parents and their feelings vis-a-vis each other is a very important factor that determines these potentials. If the two hold respect and love for each other, a powerfully *saathvic* energy is invested in the seed. If there is anger domination etc. It will affect the seed accordingly. The sperm carries the seeds that grows into hard tissue and the vessels that carry *prana*; the egg carries the seeds of all the soft tissue and the brain; The *prana* that enters the space at the time when insemination is taking place gives a directionality and potentiality to the other elements.
2. **Theatre** in the Indian context gives a unique set of meanings to each of its elements. The stage for the play is contiguous with the space for the audience. A screen often having 7 colours painted on it separates the preparatory space from the action space. This symbolises time: The elaborate rituals around the make up and dressing are processes where the spirit of the character (Say Arjuna or Krishna or Draupadi) is invoked to enter the vessel i.e., the actor. When the mask is complete the actor is transformed. When he enters the action space from behind the screen, he has brought the spirit down from its ethereal home into the here and now. The audience and the mythical heros live in the present “time-space” for the duration of the play. The person who takes the mask of the hero is treated with the same respect as the form of the divine hero in the temple. Puja and offerings may be made to the mask-deity. The action space is treated as a sanctified space. The actors who might be from the same village with an on going set of relationships and linkages with the audience are transported and live in the sacred theatre space together in the transformed reality. The whole experience

has the potential to transform the actor and audience since they have lived in the time-space of the heroic reality.

3. **Samskara:** A *samskara* is a ritual that marks the rites of passage of an individual in his community. The structure of the *samskara* is deeply thought out. The word *samskara* means acculturation. The ritual is seen as the transition point between two stages of the individual's life. The practices that will help the individual enter the new stage are described in great detail in these rituals. The choice of the time when an individual is put through a *samskara* is very interesting. In its purest form, the following processes are gone through. The physical growth and readiness of the person to make the transition are assessed by the elders; The psychological maturity and inner preparedness to enter a new level of responsibility are gauged. The ritual is an event that clearly draws a boundary between the previous state and the emerging one. It is an invitation into a space that is part of the social design of the community. It is simultaneously a message to the individual and the society. The individual is clearly told what is expected of him and the society begins to treat the individual in a new form. Both the individual and the society begin to engage in a new dialogue.

Applications in the traditional context :

Let us look at two examples to understand this. The Upanayanam ceremony when the child is given the initiation into the Gayatri Mantra. The child is referred to as a "balyan" before the ritual and a "brahmachari" after the ritual. How the brahmachari ought to seek a teacher is told to him. He is also given the choice to become a hunter, a herdsman, a fighter, a trader or a seeker of truth. The responsibilities are outlined and gifts are offered to help him in the quest that lies ahead. The final act of the ritual is a dramatic symbolisation of the transition. The new brahmachari approaches his mother and begs for food: "Bhavati Bhiksham dehi". Through this act he reinforces his new status and responsibility. He is no longer to take his position at home for granted. He must perform his duty as a brahmachari and be deserving of his upkeep. In this enactment theatre meets the real life transition and punctuates it with a powerful message. You have a new role to play in society.

The marriage rituals also have very deep philosophical content. One of the rituals (now mostly forgotten) will illustrate the dramatic and deeply meaningful character of the process. Just before the actual celebration starts the groom is given a choice. He can serve the community as a householder or remain a brahmachari and follow a spiritual path. The choice is dramatised by having two people enter a dialogue with the bridegroom, a bachelor-elder from his family and the bride's married uncle. After the two alter egos of the choice have completed the dialogue the bridegroom is taken to the edge of the town and left seated on a rock by the river, If he chooses the spiritual path, he walks away across the river and goes to Kasi seeking deep learning. If he chooses to be a householder, he comes back to the village, he is welcomed with gifts and finery. The marriage celebration begins. The individual has reflected on what the change in role means, he is willing to accept the new role in society.

Redefining the concepts :

Let us put these three principles together and articulate the form and processes of a role:

- The role is essentially a space with a clearly defined boundary
- The nature of this boundary is defined by the social context
- However, it is recognised that the individual who enlivens the role space will bring to it his own unique propensities and aspirations.
- Dialogue is the favoured mode of establishing the nature of the boundary. The protagonist has a right to bring to it his own choice. Within a certain band of variability he can exercise his autonomy. This band is the space offered by the social context and the collective wisdom of what is good for the society.
- The role has a functional aspect. This is defined by the responsibilities and expectations conveyed to the protagonist through the dramatic dialogues in the ritual.
- The role has a spiritual dimension. This is defined and conveyed to the protagonist in the process of the ritual and the invocation made to the various deities seeking their help and blessings.

The framework of role taking used in Dance will help us understand how to translate this paradigm into a live organisation system.

The stages of growth of an aspirant in dance are the following:

Aanghikam, aahaaryam, vaachikam and saathvikam. Health and vigour or *aaroghyam* is a pre-requisite. In all traditional modes of teaching, the teacher ensures that the student is capable of withstanding the rigours of the discipline and will live long enough to replenish the discipline through teaching and/or discharge of appropriate roles in society.

Aanghikam is the process where the “*angas*”, the limbs, are exercised and trained to move in the right manner with grace. This stage of learning includes the performance of various movements and exercises that strengthen the limbs and make the body capable of taking the complete repertoire of postures required in dance.

Aaharyam: Here the aspirant is taught the appropriate use of gesture to convey a character. It also refers to the appropriate use of dress and ornaments to define a character. Obviously, one cannot walk with swaying hips and sensuousness when taking the role of a warrior.

Vaachikam: The performance of dance has to harmonise with music. The music is in the form of a descriptive song that a lover pinning for the loved one, or the description of a divine form. The

ability of the dancer to convey the nuances of the meaning of the song in its entirety is *vaachikam*.

Saathvikam: This is a stage rarely reached by dancers. The dancer enters into a deep state of attention (*dhyana*) while performing the dance, and evokes in himself the spiritual essence of the hero or whichever character he represents. This deep evocation gets communicated to the audience who experience a resonant feeling.

Placing the concepts in an organisation context :

If we transpose these concepts to an organisation context, we can draw immediate parallels. The health of a person and his ability to respond to the challenges of his job without feeling stressed is a basic requirement. While this might seem obvious, very rarely do we see organisations invest anything to ensure an individual physical and psychological health. The medical examinations and reimbursements for money spent on health-care do not reflect the serious nature of the principle we are discussing. The source of energy in an organisation is the individual. His health and vibrancy are the foundation on which all action rests.

Aanghikam: The acquisition of a set of skills necessary to discharge ones responsibilities. Organisations do pay a fair amount of attention to this aspect since the relationship between the skills availability and performance is clear.

Aaharyam: Strangely, this is one aspect where very little attention is paid. Individuals learn, implicitly and “On the Job”. The range of psychological roles a person can play is often limited to the persons background and training. Given the fact that in India, traditional roles hold sway in the home, the map of relationship is anchored in “Parent-son” or “sibling” maps that are agrarian. Modern homes are often spaces where the tradition is absent but not replaced with any meaningful “presence” of an institution. The role maps in such homes is even more restrictive they are often held in very linear models. Schools and Colleges focus on cognitive processes. Emotional intelligence and life skills are not engaged with. An individual entering an organisation is inwardly living in a small space and is fluent with a small range of roles. When challenges at work call for a new set of responses and greater resilience, the person feels stressed. In the context of the theatre, it is analogous to a person who is fluent in empathising with the internal processes of a supporting character. He will be able to play the roles of Lakshmana or Nakula with conviction. Roles like Arjuna, Rama or Ravana would be very demanding. He will not be able to invest their portrayal with power. His repertoire is limited and therefore, he will not be able to occupy the whole range of locations and space offered in the Choreography.

Vaachikam: There are very few organisations where a core mission is reflected in the language and the actions of the organisation. To achieve this, each person in the organisation must invest a great deal of energy to align himself to the larger goals of the team and the organisation. Each person must listen to the underlying rhythms of the organisation and play his part in a spontaneous harmony. This kind of deep alignment is evident in powerful and lasting organisations. It is built with care and sacrifice from a key set of players in the system.

Saathvikam: A very interesting phenomenon takes place when there is a deep alignment in a physical system. To illustrate, a magnet is piece of iron where there is a deep alignment of the molecular structure. When a physical system displays this characteristic, it acquires the ability to influence the behaviour of other systems at a distance. A magnet attracts pieces of iron at a distance from itself. This ability is called long range order. Teams and organisations that achieve a deep rhythm and order in its functioning develop a great power and focus. They could be seen as magnets that attract customers! They are also responsive to change.

Ideas for this evolved after I did a lab for Koothu-p-pattarai, a theatre group in Chennai, almost a decade ago. In order to bring some of these principles into management practice, Rudraprasad Sengputa and I initiated the "Learning Theatre" in 1991. A form of experiential learning that brings together theatre and process work.

Programme Design :

Most team building and behavioural programmes presently in use have a strong foundation in a western set of assumptions of man, society and work. In order to create an opportunity where an individual can confront his patterns of role taking and discover culturally contingencies ways of developing himself, I have attempted a form of encounter groups I call The Learning Theatre. Rudraprasad Sengputa (Director of Nandikar) is not only a great actor and director of plays, but is also a deeply erudite person. I have sought his partners in designing the Learning Theatre. Following that, I now continue working on this with Koothu-p-pattarai.

The dynamics of the work will be best illustrated by the following course of a typical lab.

After the preliminaries, the participants are put through exercises to loosen themselves up. Most participants are shy and do not relate to the here and now of the situation or of other people. To break the ice a few 'party games' with the potential for deeper meaning are played. This releases a lot of initial inhibition and since most of these games involve naming and touch, a great deal of cohesiveness and openness get created immediately. This is followed up asking the participants to explore the meanings of a few often-used words like relationship, people, and touch. The group then graduates to trust exercises and these exercises are punctuated with intense discussions on the meaning of trust, trustworthiness and power. As the group finds more freedom in the physical part of the work, they also find it easy to speak from a deeper part of themselves.

The group then moves to exercises like 'mirroring'. One person behaves like a mirror and follows the leader. Here, though the work starts at a physical plane of gestures, the intensity picks up and deeper communication takes place. Participants are often amazed at the extent of wordless communication that takes place when one pays attention to another. Through a judicious mixture of simple exercises, reflection and self-expression, the participants learn the alphabets of authentic expression of oneself. The exercises are aimed at working all the sensory perceptions. Faculties of smell and touch are also often not explored in the daily living processes. The opening up of the senses puts participants in touch with many ways in which they have narrowed down their lives. Often there is a link between deeply coded self-image that postulates limitations in the self and dangers of the outside world. It is as though the person carries a kind of psychological

imprisonment that deprives him of sensory experience of the world also. The success that the participant enjoys in discovering new dimensions of experience seems to have a global effect. He becomes willing to say "I can" and this reflects in a new freedom he discovers in his body and range of expressions he can explore. Participants get very excited when they discover how powerful their expressions become when feeling and action flow together. Not only is the expression more authentic, it also comes through as more assertive.

The processes of the lab move the participants to explore more complex issues of relationships. Status games that are the constant backdrop of most transactions are explored. This is then expanded to include simple every day situations. The complex dynamics of influence, domination, submission and stalking that characterise human communications come alive through body use, voice tonalities and gesture.

The group is now ready to explore how their own experience of growing up, dealing with significant others in their life space, managing the pulls and pushes of the familial and learning contexts have not only shaped their lives but have deeply impacted their entire psychic and somatic structure.

This is done in a non-threatening manner by weaving a story of a fictitious person. To illustrate, Gowri is a blind girl who one meets often in the local train. Each member in turn enacts a tiny incident - perhaps one or two sentences long that expresses how Gowri became the way she is. Though the speculation is about Gowri, the story as it unfolds becomes very reflective and highlights the process of living and what it does to each one of us. The group moves into a period of reflection about what the story building meant to each one in their own life. The story built up a relationship between Gowri and Rajan. A meeting between the two is postulated in a park. Two participants play the role of Gowri and Rajan. The unplanned event takes on a life of its own as each person invests the role he has chosen with depth and authenticity. The play ends up becoming a deep confrontation of the self for each one. The group spontaneously moves into a period of introspection.

The group is then introduced to the intense work of the "theatre of oppression" a few volunteers form pairs and one of the pair intensifies his feelings of anger and hate and the other receives it and is forced to experience the feelings of submission and helplessness. At the zenith of intensity of this non-verbal exchange, the pair slowly reverses the positions without losing the tension and depth of feeling.

The exercises and introspection came together in the final part of the lab. Each one writes down a few incidents in his life that have been a turning point. As he shares this with the group, others who feel moved by the sharing form a small group of 4 or 5 participants. This group designs and enacts a play (about 5 to 7 minutes) where the person whose life event is being portrayed plays a minor role. After the play is completed the others in the group reflect their experience by speaking as the "alter ego" of the role that moved them.

This is a very intense moment for the person. Watching the events unfold as a 3rd person and then receiving a whole set of alternate responses and points of view creates a very deep impact. The

subconscious codings of the event, the scars and hurts that it has left in the person are put into a very fresh and different perspective. It helps the person step out of his skin as it were and takes a whole new location in his inner space. This changes his entire self-construct and releases the person from a psychic cul-de-sac. The earlier part of the work in the lab is like a step by step preparation. It opens up new body emotion, relationships, opens up a range of selves that are encountered deeply and thus loosens up the crystallised inner space. Old entrenched patterns ungrasp their vice like hold on the psychosomatic patterns of the person. He is able to experience new possibilities and ways of being. A whole range of roles and feeling tones are within his capability.

Participants who come into the programme with only a few notes of their repertoire of responses available to them leave the lab with an experience of being able to play a whole set of tunes and at varying rhythms. This new repertoire can be deployed in various life situations in many different ways. The participant has moved through the stages of *Aanghikam* and *Aaharyam* and discovered the integration of feeling, thought and actions of *Vaachikam*. This brief sojourn in the space-time of the programme opens up a whole range of forms and ways of being, each of which is lived and experienced in a live here and now situation. The learning is thus very powerful and has the potential to wipe out negative codes and patterns and offer a wide choice to the person.

The Learning Theatre is being offered as part of leadership training at the Murugappa Group. About fifty participants have gone through this experience as part of their preparation to take on leadership roles, in the last 3 years. Public programmes for "stranger groups" have also been held with great success. Participants report an immediate as well as lasting changes in the way they act and feel. As a process of emphasising a transition from one type of role to another, this form of encounter has much to offer an organisation.