

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF A ROLE THROUGH AN INDIAN PARADIGM

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 and blocks 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 and action.

1. Conception: A space is created which pulls together the semen and the egg. Simultaneous with the meeting of the semen 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 semen 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. 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 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 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 samaskara means acculturation. The ritual is seen as the transition point between two stages of the individuals 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 samaskara 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 accessed 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.

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 “bhramachari” 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 hearsdman, 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.

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 an 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.

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.

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.

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 individuals 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 a 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.