

# ✓ Training in Voice and Speech: One Indian Approach

I have been engaged in working on voice and speech for the last twenty and odd years. In general I would have liked to describe my approach as Indian. However, the diversity and multiplicity of training methods adopted and methodologies advocated all over the country drove me to the safety of a title less ambitious in scope! My approach is certainly Indian but I am only *one* of the Indians working in the area! Time has arrived to compare and assess the rationale as well as the efficacy of the current approaches. To facilitate the process it is essential that the individual positions are stated clearly, comprehensively, with a marked performance-orientation and with a due regard for larger cultural perspectives. I hope to do so as far as my viewpoint is concerned. For all intents and purposes the statement is designed to put forward a conceptual framework which controls the emerging theorization, vocal practicals, exercises and finally the co-ordinating procedures. During the workshop session it should be possible to tackle individual cases and specific issues arising out of the stated framework and the related theatric aspect. In other words the present exercise is pitched at an abstract level, an action inevitable if the desire is to accommodate fundamentals as well as peripherals.

## The tenets

What are the tenets of my approach? Tenets require to be stated clearly as they are the basic principles or a body of them one believes in.

In this respect I would like to put forward a three-levelled hierarchical conceptual structure.

The first level is occupied by basic concepts, the second by the derived and the third by the applied. Concepts at the three levels are distinct though there are logical overlaps and consequently a mobile class of marginal concepts is also observed. All concepts together make possible theories which are the inevitable concomitants of human actions or facts which they generate. There are no theory-neutral facts in human behaviour. This needs to be stated firmly and pressed home ruthlessly because artists and especially performers are scornful of theories and theorization. Those mournful and frequent references to wide and periodically widening gap between theory and practice, or science and art, or technique and artistry etc. are inevitable results of lax thinking and crude aestheticizing! Artists and especially performers are engaged in a kind of non-verbal con-

ceptualizing. The ideal position is when performers verbalize these same non-verbalized structures. Alternatively non-performers are expected to translate these structures with reasonable fidelity to the originals. Codification of performing practice (i.e. grammar) is bound to lag behind the performance but aesthetics does not. Aesthetic thinking, even though not verbalized, keeps abreast with performance. In other words a valid performance is theorizing in action awaiting verbalization.

## Basic, derived and the applied . . .

The three concept-types need to be distinguished. I distinguish between them and that is the first tenet of my approach.

The following tabulation indicates the differentiating features:

<i>Basic</i>	<i>Derived</i>	<i>Applied</i>
1) Enjoys maximum abstraction.	Has a narrower range of abstraction, functions as a meeting ground of abstract and the concrete.	Related maximally to a concrete work.
2) Inherently related to multiple life-areas and patterns.	Connected directly with specific art-activity.	Linked vitally to particular works.
3) Chief feeder disciplines are philosophy, logic and metaphysics.	Aesthetics and practical criticism are the mainstays.	Craft and technology function as the ruling agencies.
4) Enable establishment of and inter-connections between different world-views.	Encourage inter-art relationship in creation and assessment.	Lead to the mixed-media genre and art-forms.
5) Are responsible for offering cultural perspectives.	Generate isms and other aesthetic ideologies.	Forge methods and techniques.

<i>Basic</i>	<i>Derived</i>	<i>Applied</i>
6) Operate mainly at the ratio-cinative level.	Reflect the psycho-physical processes that cover the performing triad: artist—work—receiver.	Exemplify concentration on artists as initiators.
7) Indicate dimensions of experience irrespective of quality.	Create and move away from notional boundaries to define art-activity as qualitative experience.	Explore specified units according to the current norms of efficiency and artistry.

It is my contention that a sound methodology pertaining to creation, training and appreciation can emerge as well as prove workable only if the three conceptual levels are accommodated well. Omission of concepts at any of the levels is likely to lure one into an undeveloped complex of ideas. An idea proves fruitful if and when it is worked out at all the three levels discussed so far.

**Theatric universality: a tender myth**

A tenet which follows from the triad of conceptual levels pertains to the much talked of universality of the theatric impact. Training methods and the underlying philosophy are necessarily conditioned by the theatric content which may be individual, societal, cultural and finally universal. It is to be noticed that the four levels become progressively wider but also more and more abstract. The universality of theatric impact is a myth in the sense it is an intangible, creative force. It is also tender in the sense that too frequent and gross claims to universality have a withering effect on the original import of the work. Hence my training model has adequate room for exercises designed for communication at the level of individuals, societal groups, cultural entities, and trans-cultural societies. It is easy to understand that as one moves from the individual to the trans-cultural the training-content becomes less and less dependent on language and more and more voice-oriented. The more abstract the theatric content the more potential it has of trans-cultural communication. In turn the more trans-cultural the import the more it depends on non-verbal communication. Voice and vocalization number among the most important of the non-verbal tools an actor has, because apart from gestures the other tools such as make-up, lighting, set-design and costumes are not controlled directly by the actor.

**Voice, language and gesture**

The linkage between the three assumes special significance in theatric communication. Firstly, because theatre enjoys/faces linguistic multiplicity even within the country. Secondly, language-based theatre continues to occupy a major place in the theatric world in spite of frequent and varied rebellious stances of the experimentalists. Thirdly, while language is obviously verbal and acquired, vocal and gestural explorations are non-verbal and largely innate. In other words training methods are required to be devised and imparted in such a way as to strike a balance between personal and societal idioms as also between well-defined meanings and suggested contents.

I therefore stress the distinction between voice and speech in my teaching. While improvement in and extension of effective ranges of vocal parameters is taken care of by a set of exercises, another is devised for the language-based units in theatric speech. It is here that training in pitch, volume, timbre on the one hand and vowel-sounds, consonants, nasals etc. on the other find their respective places and weightages.

A special word is perhaps necessary about the language-gesture relationship, chiefly because it is a relationship that binds verbal activity with gesture which is eminently non-verbal. And yet, a well-written/spoken word provides a matrix for gestures of certain efficacy. A good theatric word is a seed-form and to unravel the mysteries of it is a sure way to unfold an all-embracing *abhinaya*. When I see actors and directors going about clumsily in search of 'business' I do not forget to pray for their continued literacy!

**Music-speech, as a continuum**

Considerations put down so far have influenced me to regard music-speech as a continuum. I take it that to explore the fundamental properties of sound as a phenomenon is a valid quest in case of both the manifestations with the extra emphasis on quality or timbre *a la* music. It is clear that language, though optional in music, is central to speech while a high degree of systematization of acoustic dimensions (obtained in music) is an alternative exploited selectively in speech. Therefore to trace the music-speech continuum through language is to try to get the best of both the worlds—one dominated by the non-verbal quality and the ambiguous and the other by narrative powers, multiplicity of meanings and an exclusively human connection. I have often wondered how theatre-thinkers and trainers have failed to profit by the repository of an encompassing knowledge about voice in music! In brief, the lapse could be attributed to ignorance of the wide variety of musical practices as well as to unimaginative adoption of the prosenium-based play during the modern period as the sole legitimate drama of the land. I must add, though

as a side-remark, that those who have relied mainly on language to solve the puzzle of the efficacy or otherwise of communicative models have erred because they have ignored communication in music! The non-verbal in gestures has attracted attention but not the one in music!

It is in this context that I would like to remind ourselves of the mature Indian tradition which places at our disposal an entire hierarchy of sound-connected manifestations. I am obviously referring to *shabda*, *nada*, *dhvani*, *swara* and *varna* as acoustic manifestations at different, though related levels. While *shabda* is that property of the ether (*akash*) which is perceived by the ear (*shravana*), *nada*, is that which is produced when something strikes on something else. This *abata* variety of *nada* is distinguished from *anabata* (the unstruck) which is perceived only by *yogin-s*. *Dhvani* is that *nada* produced by musical instruments etc. Finally, *dhvani*, when it results into musical notes is called *swara* and the one turning into vowels/consonants is know as *varna*.

It should be clear that workers in music and speech would benefit by an awareness of the four-fold Indian mapping of the world of sound. As one moves down the hierarchy, the acoustic expression tends to narrow in application. In a parallel action the criteria becomes finer, and finally the techniques arising out of the operational concept assume a more specific character. The significance of this dynamics can hardly be exaggerated. Whether in creation or reception, preservation or training, structural analysis or constructional sophistication—the four-fold manifestation functions as a guide to a fruitful activity. It is pitifully true and truthfully piteous that the vigour displayed in the traditional formulation is hardly emulated in creative and critical endeavours!

### The importance of being composite . . .

Yet another of my tenets concerns the nature of the compositeness theatre proverbially enjoys.

The term composite is from 'com' = together + 'ponere' = to put. The dictionaries seem content to note that 'composite is one which consists of parts'. Works on critical terminology are however silent. The obvious inference is that the contemporary connotation which refers to composite as 'one, combining many arts' is a case of useful accretion to the original meaning. However, the significance of the concept lies in its perceivable thrust in the direction of inter-arts relationship, an aesthetic issue with a direct bearing on every theatric process, procedure, method and exercise.

### What do we mean by the term?

The myth of the origin of drama in India speaks of Bharata's selective and sensitive borrowing. The

recited, sung and the ritualistic were respectively borrowed from the *Rig*, *Sama* and *Yajur veda-s* while the *Atharvaveda* was the source of *rasa*, the ultimate impact each drama was to try for. Is it because of the diversity of sources that drama becomes composite?

In my opinion this is not so. The comparatively recent usage of the term composite in aesthetic thinking suggests a phase of reversal after arts have chosen to follow paths of separate and intensive developments for centuries. The reversal of strategies cannot be expected to give the same, early kind of drama, because during the intervening ages all theatric arts were busily carving out their own autonomous areas bringing about changes in our aesthetic perceptions. Under the circumstances a mere coming together of arts cannot bestow a composite character on a product. To earn the rubric 'composite' the arts that come together must owe allegiance to different families. Art-families are formed on varied basis such as the mediums used, explored sensibilities, audience-contribution, scope allowed to artists etc. The following prominent art-families can be identified to make the point clearer:

<i>Art-Family</i>	<i>Member-Arts</i>
Literary Arts	Fiction, poetry, drama (read)
Fine Arts	Painting, sculpture
Performing Arts	Dance, drama, music
Combined Arts	Architecture, calligraphy etc.
Composite Arts	Films, drama

Theatre is today composite because of the strategic reversal prompting it to bring together arts that are otherwise fully, independently developed, and performed. The fact is important in the contemporary training which must aim at creating a composite sensibility. My training procedures therefore take into consideration the distances human mind have covered since the time dance, drama and music were *one* expression to reach the present state—when they are *different* entities mingled into *one* expression. This is the reason why I delve deep into poetics, aesthetics, cultural musicology, musicology, musical acoustics, theatric history and other such disciplines to give shape to voice and speech studies in modern times.

These sciences/disciplines enable a willing performer to profit by what other sciences have earned. The insights obtained by musical acoustics into the nature of vowel and consonant sounds thus become available to a speaker. What musical aesthetics has to say about the essential ambiguity of sound, liberates a speaker from the shackles of grammatical meanings. Cultural musicology opens new avenues to a performer by stressing the innate relationship between art and the non-art areas of life. Musicology brings home the truth of the unexceptional continuity of the performing

tradition as distinct from scholastic formulations. The codifications in their own turn bring to notice the value of firm systematization as an element facilitating deviations. In the ultimate analysis deviations are royal roads to creativity! The pooled resources of the developed multiple arts and sciences make theatre a composite art without a parallel. If training methodologies do not explore and exploit the body of insights collected by theatric aspects as well as the theatre-related fields of life, it will suffer the fate of an atrophied limb! All multi-pronged attacks on the problem of theatre-training are significant primarily because they move beyond a mere passing on and acquisition of particular skills. Training of performers should take care of skills and craftsmanship as well as artistry and creativity.

### Three cheers for creativity

It is of course easy to put creativity on a rosary than to put it into practice! One is also aware of the doubtful efficacy of a planned training programme vis-a-vis creativity. And yet, on account of my musical training, I believe that it is both possible and desirable to take a trainee upto a take-off point by adopting a training programme worked out in great detail. My motto is to create an aptitude and strengthen the attitude! To put it briefly—improvisation, imagery arousal and generation of *ashta satvika bhava-s a la* Bharata (in relation to voice and speech)—constitute my three cheers for creativity! I claim that the three have a valid application in other theatric aspects ranging much beyond voice and speech though my own efforts have been less ambitious.

### Improvisation

The much talked off improvisation comes naturally and easily to musicians. It has been a mystery to me why Indian directors - actors - theatre-pedagogues should look elsewhere to understand and imbibe the phenomenon!

Improvisation came to the forefront as a reaction against stylized acting. However the conceptual base of the contemporary improvisation is absurdly narrow. Most of the improvisatory work limits itself to movements and gestures. It operates an extremely limited palette of sensory perceptions. I prefer to take my trainees through the paces to profit by the insights offered in the ancient as well as modern readings in perception-psychology. I encourage the use of a wider array of sensibilities, I add to that the acceptance and use of certain mental powers not granted a full legitimacy in the usual theatre-pedagogy.

Finally, I advocate and put into practice the *yogic* methods of deliberate masking and concentration as

tools to psycho-physical coordination aimed at creative expression. My improvisation exercises are object-based, music-based and situation-based.

### Imagery arousal

A related strategy developed to take trainees towards creativity is, as I describe it, 'imagery arousal'. In times when we are (as Coleridge put it) 'suffering from the tyranny of the eye', it is necessary to recall that imagery is not a monopoly of the sense of vision! Imagery is creation of unified responsorial units by each individual sensibility in its own terms. Variety, succession and frequency of imagery leads to richness of experience, and as Henry James suggested, 'to be creative is to experience'. To image is, to some extent, a technique which can be taught. Imaging extends the area of an individual's capacity to feel, sometimes it deepens the existing feelings and in rare cases teaching to image disturbs the trainee into a new consciousness of his own abilities as well as shortcomings! Verbalization plays an important part in the teaching of imaging and at certain junctures imaging is coupled with language-learning procedures, though at subtler levels.

### Ashta-satvika-bhava

The eight essential sense-expressions identified by Bharata are : *stambha* (immobility), *sveda* (perspiration), *romanch* (horripilation), *vaiswarya* (voice-breaks), *kampa* (tremor), *vaivarnya* (losing colour), *ashrupata* (shedding tears) and *pralaya* (to merge, to lose consciousness). They are obviously non-verbal! To all purposes the situation is therefore paradoxical!

To solve the problem I accept the paradox, and further, I adopt a procedure which uses words and verbalization, voice and articulation to reach the wordless and the voiceless. In other words the eight essential states are reached after words and vocalizations are fully understood and deeply felt. You then leave them behind to reach the state of *vachik abhinaya*.

### Conclusion

In my training model a circle is thus completed, I begin by turning every stone to unearth layers of meanings in each and every sound and word. The passionate and an agitated search takes me to many arts and sciences. But finally both voice and word are stilled into a nearly Buddhist silence impregnated with an artistic truth comparable to a pool of crystal-clear, clean and calm water. At the end of the training both voice and speech are at peace with each other as well as with the world without!

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