RESEARCH ARTICLE

DECODING THE SILENCE: UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUE IN INDIAN SILENT FILMS

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ABSTRACT

The current study looks at early silent films and explores extant clips to decode the complex and multiple communication modes that combine to create a larger meaning. Using the framework of the theory of multimodalities (Kress 2001), this article acknowledges that the spoken word is merely one way to communicate stories and demonstrates how multimodalities are used in film narratives. But other theories could also be applied to decode the communication technique in silent films. The origin of films in India is universally acknowledged to be rooted in classical and folk theatre practices. This link with traditional performances justifies the use of the same aesthetic norms for films, that is the *Natyashastra* (Ghosh 1957). The theories posited in that ancient text on dramaturgy provide an alternate way to understand silent films made in India. This article picks two concepts in particular out of the elaborate analysis of performance in the *Natyashastra*: (I) The categorisation of Abhinaya (modes of performance) and (II) the Rasa-Bhava Theory (the purpose and impact of performance). Moreover, rather than dismiss the theory of multimodalities, this article attempts to align that theory to the one described in the *Natyashastra*. The objective of this article is to offer fresh insight into the technique of Indian films in the silent era by using norms of the *Natyashastra* and to demonstrate that Western and Indian theories of non-verbal communication can co-exist and be understood similarly.

Keywords: Silent films, Indian theatre, Multimodality, *Natyashastra*, Abhinaya, Rasa-Bhava Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Brothers Lumiere screened their first, commercial film clip of workers leaving the Lumiére factory on 28 December 1895. Shortly after, the first Indian film to be screened in India was Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatavdekar's footage of a wrestling match in Bombay's Hanging Gardens in 1899, titled *The Wrestler*. Several films were made by Indians after *The Wrestler*, including the 1913 film by Dadasaheb Phalke *Raja Harishchandra*, accepted as the first full-length feature made in India. This history of films and how it all began, in the West and in India, has been documented several times over.

What is significant is that filmmaking in India was just a few years behind the first screening of films made in the West. The technology of recording, editing and presenting motion pictures were well established before the first films were screened for entertainment in the West. What is interesting is the speed with which this technology came to India. For example, according to a report in The Economic Times, the first electric lamp in Asia was used in Bengaluru, K.R. Market in 1905 (https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/ magazines/ panache/did-you-know-that-bengaluruwas-the-first-city-in-asia-to-use-electrified-street-lamps/articleshow/65510890.cms).

This is 27 years after electric lamps lit the streets of Northumberland, UK. But unlike the technology of electric lamps, the technology of films came to India almost immediately, with the first Indian film to be made and screened in India in 1899, barely three years behind the first paid public screening of the scene known as *Workers Leaving the Lumiére Factory* by the Brothers Lumiére screened on 28 December 1895, in Paris.

Yet little work is done in researching and analysing the early films in India, unlike its Western counterparts. There is a need to acknowledge these early attempts at film making and to analyse them with some seriousness. This article therefore explores silent films through extant clips and hopes to understand their communication technique, first in terms of the Theory of Multimodalities and then by applying the tenets of performance and entertainment found in the *Natyashastra*, specifically the concept of Abhinaya and the Rasa-Bhava Theory.

2. THE SILENT FILM NARRATIVE

The earliest features that audiences were willing to pay for were what has been called 'actualities': a train entering a station, people leaving a factory, etc. This term was coined by film pioneers Auguste and Louis Lumière, and referred to short films capturing real-life activities. The appeal was largely in the wonder of watching real life on screen. Film theorist Tom Gunning in his famous essay *The Cinema of Attractions: The Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde* described this as the 'Cinema of Attractions', explaining the popularity of this new technology by noting that early film viewers found these clips to be shocking and exciting. Initially films competed with other modes of entertainment like the circus or theatre, but it surprised even its inventors, the Lumière Brothers, by rapidly supplanting all other options for entertainment.

As the novelty of moving pictures began to wear off, filmmakers started to use the technology of filmmaking to tell stories and not just to document life. Experiments with shooting and editing techniques, along with ideas of mis-en-scene and montage, helped cinema start out on a path that led to films becoming what it is today. Pioneering work in the West by people like Georges Méliès, Edwin S. Porter, D. W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and others, helped cinema to transit from being merely moving photographs to a powerful story telling vehicle. Perhaps the most important contribution in film narratives came from Lev Kuleshov. His experiment is now famous as the Kuleshov Effect in which he demonstrated how two shots taken back-to-back can mean more than when each shot is taken individually, the enriched meaning coming from the viewer's ability to bridge the separate shots and find meaning by mentally linking two consecutive shots. The learnings from Kuleshov's experiment not only affected how films were edited, but also the acting style in film. His insight helped films to narrate a story through a series of juxtaposed images, instead of depending on only words or continuous action on screen. It can be claimed that Eisenstein's method of narrating with montage editing was made possible because of Kuleshov's experiment, giving the world his masterpiece of a silent film, *Battleship Potemkin*.

Regrettably, in India, early silent films have been largely forgotten. Scholars of film studies believe that nearly 1500 silent films were made in India before the advent of sound, of which only 29 remain, and even that is badly preserved. Researchers have pointed to the lack of skill in restoring old film strips and the absence of proper storage and archival facilities in India. "When, as historians, we try to reconnect the Indian cinema's own history with the larger history of the twentieth century, which it necessarily captures, we inevitably face the difficulty of having to square cultural survivals on film with the quixotic saga of the actual survival of film." says Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his essay *The Film Fragment: Survivals in Indian Silent Film*. Articles and books on the silent era in India are mostly descriptive, focusing on the choice of stories and themes and not so much on

technique and narrative form. The general assessment has been that these films are raw and unsophisticated, and the acting style dismissed, even ridiculed, as being unnecessarily theatrical.

3. THEORY OF MULTIMODALITY & SILENT FILMS

Silent films rely on images, rather than words, to convey meaning. The theory of multimodality works particularly well to understand the world of cinema, as films are themselves a complex whole of several modes of communication, using words, sound, movement, images, light and shade, and more to tell a cohesive story.

The theory of multimodality explains the way people interact with each other by listing all possible elements (modes) that contribute to the communication process. This would include not just the written word, but also speech tonality, gesture, gaze, and visual forms. According to Danica Jovanovic, in her article *Important People in Multimodality Theory*, Roland Barthes, M.A.K. Halliday, Theo van Leeuwen, Gunther Kress, Michael O'Toole, Robert Hodge, Jay Lemke, Anthony Baldry and Paul J. Thibault are some of the most influential scholars who have explored multiple modes of communication and meaning. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen are credited with being the originator and proponent of this theory. In an interview, Kress indicated that we need to "rethink language and the significance of language if we are thinking of meaning…Language is only one important way we make meaning." Kress points out that there are also gestures, images, etc which contribute to how one may communicate, all these ways coming together in what he calls "a rich orchestration of meaning." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-yO04u8MHcm).

Based on Kress' Theory of Multimodalities, the New London Group listed five modes of communication which could be applied to communication techniques in early silent cinema. These are:

a. **Linguistic/alphabetic:** This mode of communication deals with the written and spoken words. In early silent films, this refers to the intertitles between shots and the live commentaries that sometimes accompanied the screening of films. *The Gold Rush* (1925) was made with intertitles and then re-released in 1942 with sync sound. Arguably, the silent film is considered the better version of this Chaplin classic.

b. **Visual:** This mode is to do with images. In silent films, it could be said that the film as a whole is nothing but moving images. The concept of visual as mode of communication is applied to the use of light and shade, especially in the use of harsh shadows seen in early German Expressionism to express suffering and angst. Horror films were commonly made in the silent era, using twisted and bizarre images to establish horror films as a recognizable genre. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) is an excellent example of this.

c. **Aural:** This mode is to do with all sound, including music. It has been pointed out that 'silent' films were not really silent. All screenings included live sound of varying levels of complexity, depending on budget. The film screenings were always accompanied by live music, sometimes even with live sound effects to match the action on screen. *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) still remains a much-loved film and was the first to be shot entirely in a studio and use live sound synced to the screening of the film.

d. **Gestural:** This mode is to do with movement, expression and body language. In early silent films gestures were the major mode of communication within the film, in lieu of words. Actors exaggerated their body movements and facial expressions to help the audience clearly understand the narrative and leave no doubt in the viewer's mind as to the emotions of the scene they were watching. The close-ups used in The *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) make the film timeless and a masterpiece.

e. **Spatial:** This final mode is to do with position, physical arrangement and proximity. Spatial consciousness was especially important in comedy, which was very physical in silent films and depended on perfect timing for the comedy to work. *The General* (1926) is an example of how location and relative size was used to enhance the humor of the comic narrative.

The theory of multimodalities has definitely offered an insight into understanding silent films. But other theories of narratives could also be applied to decode their communication technique.

4. SILENT FILMS, THEATRE, AND THE *NATYASHASTRA*

An alternate way to understand silent film, especially the ones made in India, could come from aligning films to traditional theatre and exploring how narratives in film has grown organically from theatre. Ancient theories of entertainment used to understand theatre could then justifiable be applied to understanding narratives in film.

4.1. EARLY SILENT FILMS IN INDIA

As is now common knowledge, a whole lot of enterprising men in various parts of the country joined the emerging field of films. Early historians present Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatavdekar's *The Wrestlers* (1899) as the first ever Indian short film. More recently, historians have presented a contender in Hiralal Sen, who shot plays being staged at the Classic Theatre in Calcutta. Sen's short film *The Flower of Persia*, released a year earlier in 1898, is probably the earliest example of indigenous narrative cinema with some semblance of a storyline. In 1902, Jamshedji Framji Madan started showing films inside a tent in Calcutta's Maidan. He would soon set up the Elphinstone Bioscope Co., which would dominate the film production business in India for a while. However, it is generally conceded that the first full-length Indian feature in India is Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra,* which premiered in Bombay at Olympia Theatre on April 21, 1913, just 18 years after the Lumière brothers' first public screening in Paris. In this too, Ram Chandra Gopal's *Shree Pundalik* is a contender, released in 1922. But Phalke's film was 40 minutes long and processed entirely in India, while Ram Chandra Gopal's film was only 22 minutes long and processed abroad.

The attempt to make a wholly indigenous film was due to the efforts of many enterprising Indians in various parts of the country, who were fascinated by the world of films. Ever since Hiralal Sen's recording, there has been a deep-rooted connection between film and theatre. It is a documented fact that film actors came from the world of theatre and performed as though for the stage. Like in theatre, the earliest stories in film were mythological and based on literary text. The camera position choice was always frontal, letting the action speak for itself, imitating the eye of a viewer in an auditorium.

Understanding theatre in India, therefore, is a necessary entry point to analyze Indian cinema, especially at its inception.

4.2. THEATRE IN INDIA: A FULL CIRCLE

Theatre in India is seen as an aesthetic practice, documented, and analyzed centuries ago primarily in the *Natyashastra*, where theatre is seen as a gift from the gods. *Natyashastra*, describes theatrical performances and presents a theory based on style and movement, rather than plot and theme. Although Sanskrit drama seemed to have waned by the 5th century CE, the various texts, and the basic flavor of the tenets of the *Natyashastra* remains in the various forms of folk theatre practices that continue to entertain even today. Traditional storytelling and performance practices are still informed by the *Natyashastra* in India.

Western ideas of theatre and the proscenium performances came to India by the end of the 18th century when the British were consolidating their empire. By the 1850s, Indian theatre enthusiasts were producing plays in their own language in the proscenium style. 19th Century India saw performances move out of the mansions of the Indian wealthy and enter ticketed, Western style theatres. At the same time, the traditional folk forms also continued to enchant audiences. "The folk forms continued to survive in myriad shapes and forms and there was always a direct aesthetic connection between the so-called Western style Indian theatre and the folk forms. Western style Indian theatre, thus, from its very inception called for a certain kind of active hybridity in its aesthetic expressivity, claiming for itself a unique definition that was neither Western nor indigenous, but rather a 'new' form of emergent Indian aesthetic." (https://asiasociety.org/contemporary-indian-theatre-overview).

A notable change came only after World War II and the formation of a theatre group linked to the Communist Party of India, called the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), when theatre was used as a

political tool, in keeping with Marxist ideology. Marx' insistence on praxis was enthusiastically taken up by theatre professionals, especially in Calcutta, Bombay and parts of South India.

Ironically, this brought Indian theatre back in a full circle to folk theatre practices, freshly aligned with contemporary political intent. Brecht was translated into Bengali, Marathi, Telugu and Malayalam and performed using techniques common to folk forms like *Jatra, Tamasha, Burrakatha* and *Theyyam*. To be noted is the fact that these folk forms have been highly inspired and coloured by the tenets in the *Natyashastra*.

4.3. THE *NATYASHASTRA*

The *Natyashastra* is an ancient Indian text on the art of performance variously dated between 5BCE and 2CE. Unfortunately, no complete manuscript exists anymore, its origin being lost in antiquity. But it is clear that the text must have been a major influencer in theorizing performing arts in India as several scholars reference it and add to the concepts there. Bhattalollata, Srisamkuka, Bhattanayaka and Abhinavgupta are some noteworthy scholars of antiquity, whose commentaries on the *Natyashastra* remain important in aiding modern understanding of the original text.

Currently, the accepted version of the text has about 6000 verses arranged in 36 chapters. The English translation of the text by M.M. Ghosh is the primary text used to understand the rasa-bhava theory for this article. As Dr. Sunil Kothari has said, "The English translation of the Natyashastra by Manmohan Ghosh was the only text that enabled me to study a text which was so far inaccessible. However clumsy the translation is, it has remained to this date an important text." (Kothari 2019)

To help analyse silent films using Indian aesthetics, two concepts in particular are chosen out of the elaborate analysis of performance in the *Natyashastra*: (I) The categorization of Abhinaya (modes of performance) and (II) the Rasa-Bhava Theory (the purpose and impact of performance).

4.4. THE CONCEPT OF ABHINAYA IN SILENT FILM

The Sanskrit word *Abhinaya* translates to 'leading the way' and refers to the audience being led by the story-teller to experience an elevation. The *Natyashastra* describes Abhinaya to be of four kinds.

a. *Angika* **Abhinaya**

This refers to performances with gestures using parts of the body. The body itself is further studied under three major grouping: *Angas* (major limbs), *Upangas* (minor limbs) and *Pratyangas* (auxiliary limbs). For the traditional performer, gestures were in fact codified to have distinct applications. The concept of *viniyoga* is found in the *Natyashastra* and then expanded in the *Abhinaya Darpan,* guiding practitioners of silent action (including dancers) in how to use the body to narrate stories.

The acting style in silent films across the world has been seen as exaggerated and loud, as though to compensate for the lack of speech. The point to be noted now is that because of their connection in traditional theatre, Indian film actors used their body parts in sync with the codification of *viniyoga*. So, the exaggerated movements was not only based on a common-sensical approach to communication, but actually linked to codified gestures.

b. *Vachika* **Abhinaya**

This refers to the use of sound to communicate, such as speech, melody and rhythm. The *Natyashastra* describes different meters in poetry and diction. Musical notes play an important role in creating mood and emotion in a performance.

Silent films commonly use title cards in between the film clips. The text either gave the dialogues while the actors spoke soundlessly, or explained the context with texts like "Earlier that day…" When the texts were in English, many Indian viewers felt disconnected, concentrating only on the action on screen. But there was a way out for audience members who did not want to read.

As in the West, 'silent' films in India were silent only in the absence of sound on the film reel and included live orchestra at every screening. The additional fact is that very often, these film screenings would also include a commentator who would explain the action by making announcements like "Here comes Raja Harishchandra!". The style of commentating is believed by researchers to be at par with the Sutradhar of traditional of folk theatre forms like the *Nautanki* or the *Tamasha*. This commentary would vary according to the place of viewing, as each commentator would speak in the language and style of the region where these films were being screened.

c. *Aharya* Abhinaya

Refers to all the ornamentation in the performance and includes ornaments, make-up and costumes and involves the use of specific colors, hair-styles and specific dress code for particular characters. It also includes the stage props and decor.

Indian proscenium theatre used very elaborate costumes and this got transferred into the early film efforts. These costumes were not researched for period authenticity. It only addressed a general expectation of dress per role. So a king would wear shining clothes and elaborate jewelry that created a sense of grandeur, irrespective of historical authenticity. The sets of the films also were akin to the stage sets used in proscenium theatre. Though colour was not a possibility in these early films, black was associated with evil and white with purity.

d. *Sattvika* Abhinaya

Derived from the root Sanskrit word 'sattva', is said to refer to that which is real and pure in a performance. The *Natyashastra* lists eight possibilities, physical manifestation of the emotional reactions: Staṁbha (motionlessness), Sveda (perspiration), Romāñcha (horripilation), Svarasāda (change in the tonal quality of voice), Vepathu (trembling of the body), Vaivarṇya (change in colour of body), Aśru (tears) and Pralaya (loss of sense or swooning).

In the West, especially because of the Kuleshov Effect, acting had become extremely subtle, with emotions being created and narratives taken forward via inter-cuts. Buster Keaton, in fact, is famous even today because of his dead-pan expressions on screen. But unlike in the West, silent film actors in India exaggerate not only movement, but also emotions. It is common to find actors respond with tears, or loud laughter, or fainting in their roles in the story. There is no attempt to hide emotions or have a subtle reaction on screen. This is the actor's attempt at attaining *Sattvika* abhinaya.

4.5. THE RASA-BHAVA THEORY

The concepts of Rasa and Bhava are discussed in detail in Chapters 6 and 7, even though the words do come up several times throughout the *Natyashastra*. Bhava is in the realm of the practitioner of the performance art, while Rasa is what the audience experiences. Bhava in the performance generates Rasa in the audience. There are many kinds of Bhavas, but they all coalesce into the Sthayibhava (the dominant bhava). Rasa in the audience is in response to the Sthayibhava in the performance. The *Natyashastra* considered all other aspects of drama as subservient to the purpose of awakening 'Rasa' in the audience. This theory informs all practice of traditional performances, not just in technique but also in providing the purpose of art in the highest terms.

Stories in the silent films in India were not new, most being re-telling of myths and legends. The popularity of the films was not via curiosity about what happens next. Rather the audience focus was on how the familiar story is being told. The various elements (the Bhava) that aided the narration (sets, costume, acting style, music, gestures, etc.) were expected to have congruence, thereby generate strong emotions (Rasa) and transport the viewer to an elevated state of enjoyment.

5. BRIDGING THE TWO THEORIES: MULTIMODALITY AND *NATYASHASTRA*

A comparison of the basic terms shows the close connection between the two theories being used in this article:

Theory in the *Natyashastra*	Theory of Multimodalities
Angika Abhinaya	Gestural and Spatial
Vachika Abhinaya	Linguistic/alphabetic and Aural
Aharya Abhinaya	Visual
Sattvika Abhinaya: the idea that all elements of Abhinaya must have congruence so as to generate a spiritual experience	The idea that the whole of a multimodal ensemble is more than the sum of its parts

Hans-Juergen Bucher, in his essay *Understanding multimodal meaning-making: Theories of Multimodality in the Light of Reception Studies* asks two basic questions: "…first the problem of compositionality: What, specifically, does each of the individual modes contribute to the overall meaning of a discourse and how do they interact?... And second, the problem of reception, which is more or less the mirror image of the first: How do recipients integrate the different modes and acquire a coherent understanding of the multimodal discourse?" (Chap 5). The *Natyashastra* could be used to provide answers to both questions.

Bucher's first question, the "problem of compositionality", could be answered with the idea of Sthayibhava. Chapter 7 of the *Natyashastra* opens with an explanation of the Bhavas: "… *bhavas* are so called, because through Words, Gestures and Representation of the Sattva they *bhavayanti* (infuse) the meaning of the play [into the spectators]." (92). Of the forty-one feelings listed in the *Natyashastra*, only eight have Sthayi (translated as Durable) effect on people. All the rest, classified as Vibhavas, Anubhavas, Vyabhichari and Sattvika Bhavas, have the effect of strengthening the Sthayibhava, and thus also play a part in evoking Rasa.

In addition, all the categories of Abhinaya as described in the Natyashastra, are interconnected. For example, *Vachika* ahinaya (the words and music) needs to be expanded by *Angika* Abhinaya (gestures and movements). Likewise, *Sattvika* Abhinaya, which is created in the mind, is externally projected by *Angika* and *Vachika*. In other words, all modes of communications are actually interconnected and mutually dependant in the narrative technique of silent films in India and in the West.

The second, related question, the "problem of reception", could be answered with the Rasa theory. In his translation, Dr. Ghosh points out that according to the *Natyashastra*, the enjoyment of any performance is through the invocation of Rasa, which Ghosh translates as Sentiments. The primary purpose of all performing art, according to the *Natyashastra* is to evoke this appropriate Sentiment. Although the earliest mention of Rasa is found in the Upanisads, it is the *Natyashastra* which has been the first to explain Rasa as being generated by the Bhava in a creative production. The generation of Rasa of any performance is related to the clarity of the Sthayibhava. This Sthayibhava of a performance occurs when all the various Bhavas coalesce harmoniously in a performance. It constitutes the principal theme of a composition and forms the foundation for all emotions; strengthen them and helps them emerge as Rasa.

6. CONCLUSION

Words are only one dimension of communication. Silent films narrate their stories using a plethora of modes: images, sound, space, to name a few. The *Natyashastra* had also theorized upon the various ways in which narrative techniques are used during traditional performances. Despite the comparative newness of the technology and the slow realization of the infinite possibilities of film, the ancient art of storytelling is clearly visible in the early silent films, both in India and the West. What makes an impact is the endearing quality of these films, irrespective of the theory used to analyze it.

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