

Non-Verbal Communication in Indian Classical Dance Forms

Ankita Deshkar

This study delves into the intricate world of non-verbal communication within the rich mosaics of the Indian classical dance forms. The statement quoted by Noam Chomsky, “Language is not an inborn quality, it is creative and acquired”. The objective of this research is to analyse and focus on the need for humans to communicate, that too using non-verbal communication. Dance will not be relegated to simply a performance genre but will be treated as an essential ingredient of life. The focus would be on identifying the non-verbal elements of the dance that would communicate not just the stories but also social messages if needed through the gestures and other elements in Indian Classical Dance Forms. For this analysis, the researcher has considered, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, and Kathakali, the dance forms that trace their origin to the southern states of India namely, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. The research employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining elements of anthropology and performing arts to unravel the communicative nuances in the intricate hand gestures, facial expressions, body postures, and rhythmic footwork inherent in Indian classical dances. By examining the symbolism and cultural significance of gestures (mudras), the utilization of facial expressions (abhinaya), and the synchronization of movements with musical rhythms, the research seeks to unveil the deeper layers of communication that lie beneath the surface of these mesmerizing performances.

Keywords: Non-verbal communication, classical Indian dance forms, psychology, anthropology, cross-cultural communication, dance studies

Introduction

It has been claimed that communication is the most important field for the study of many key dimensions of social change. Communication is indeed divided into two parts, verbal communication which involves written or oral words, and language and non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication is a powerful aspect of human expression, transcending linguistic barriers to convey emotions, stories, and nuances. Rooted in centuries-old traditions, these Indian classical dance forms serve as a captivating visual narrative that weaves together or is an amalgamation of movement, expression, and cultural symbolism.

This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of non-verbal communication within the realm of Indian classical dance forms, which constitute gestures, rhythmic patterns, postures, facial expressions, and even try to convey certain stories through their costumes, makeup, or even music without the lyrics.

There are eight Indian classical dance forms, namely, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Kathak, Odissi, Manipuri and Sattriya. However, taking the grammar of these dance forms into consideration, the researcher has chosen to undertake a critical analysis of the dance forms, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, and Mohiniyattam. All these four dance forms belong to the southern states of India and hence, have some similarities in them.

The exploration of non-verbal communication in Indian classical dance forms not only sheds light on the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of the dance forms but also takes a look into how the past and present have shaped them.

This paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the communicative power inherent in the Indian classical dance forms. It also aims to highlight how the performers effectively communicate the stories and social messages, especially through the elements of non-verbal communication.

Communication

Keith Davis defines 'communication' as a process of passing information and understanding from one person to another. According to John Adair, 'Communication is essentially the ability of one person to make contact with another and make them understood. According to Louis Allen, 'Communication is a bridge of meaning. It involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening, and understanding. The origin of the word, 'communication' is 'communicate' or 'communis' which means 'to impart', 'to participate', 'to share' or 'to make common'. The sense of sharing is inherent in the very origin and meaning of communication.

Communication is a continuous process and it is all pervasive. While there are several types of communication, the two main types of communication are, 'verbal' and 'non-verbal' communication. Other types are one-way communication, two-way communication, and multiple-way communication and also, group communication, mass communication, and societal communication. One more type is interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. Communication is majorly a two-way process, which involves several elements of communication such as a sender, a message, a medium, a channel, a receiver, and response and feedback.

Noise

In some cases, the message may fail to produce the desired response because of a gap or a barrier between the sender and the receiver, which is also known as 'noise'. In the case of a classical

dancer, this can be because of a faulty representation of the character they are supposed to perform.

Feedback

The transmission of the receiver's response to the sender is called 'feedback'. In the case of Indian classical dance forms, where a dancer performs in the performing space, the feedback can be the reaction of the person who is a part of the audience. After witnessing a performance of the dancer, the feedback can be in the form of expressions that have invoked the 'rasa' of the 'bhava' which the dancer presented, or can be a simple gesture, such as 'clapping' or 'nodding'.

Verbal Communication

According to Penrose, 'Verbal communication consists of sharing thoughts through the meaning of words'. Verbal communication is the process that includes words, the use of sounds, and language to convey a message. In verbal communication, information is shared among more than one person using speech and language. The chief element here is 'words', which are organised properly in a sentence that makes sense, is spoken, and is heard in a language that is understood by both the sender and the receiver. According to Bovee, 'Verbal communication is the expression of information through language which is composed of words and grammar'.

Non-verbal Communication

Nonverbal communication refers to the ways in which humans convey information about their emotions, needs, intentions, attitudes, and thoughts without the use of verbal language (J.A. Hall, in International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, 2001). Nonverbal communication is produced by some means other than words. The chief element of conversation here is everything

other than the words. Nonverbal communication includes vocal elements, which is referred to as paralanguage and includes pitch, volume, and rate, and non-vocal elements, which are usually referred to as body language and include hand and body gestures, facial expressions, and even eye contact, among other, numerous things.

Types of Non-verbal Communication

Oculesics

Communication that takes place using eyes as a chief communicating tool in any circumstance is 'Oculesics'. A communicator must ensure that the receiver is conversant with the eye movement. Hence, if an Indian classical dancer is considered in this case, the dancer being the communicator must ensure that the eye movements from the performing space are visible enough for the audience to make sense of it and understand those, for the process of communication to be successful.

Haptics

Haptic movement is a supplementary aid to fulfill, express or complete an emotion or an action in communication. It refers to the study of communication by touch. This can be done by the dancer using softer movements on stage and portraying the feeling of the touch in group or solo performances.

Kinesics

Kinesics refers to body movements and postures and includes gestures of arm and hand movements, head movements, and postures that include orientation of movements of our head and positioning of the body. This could also include facial expressions that convey strong emotions. A dancer's body posture and gestures are a perfect example of how the performer might convey the abhinaya being performed along with its meaning.

Vocalics

Vocalics refers to the vocalised but not verbal aspects of non-

verbal communication, including speaking rate, pitch, volume, tone of voice, and vocal quality. These qualities, also known as paralanguage, reinforce the meaning of verbal communication, allow us to emphasize particular parts of a message, or can contradict verbal messages. However, in the case of performances, this can be used particularly by the accompanying musicians; the pitch and the tone of the voice by the singer can help convey the situation the performer tends to present.

Proxemics

Proxemics refers to the use of space and distance within communication. Proxemics is a communication that is made either by going physically near to the communicatee or receiver or by choosing a receiver in a group.

Non-verbal Communication and Indian Classical Dance Forms

Non-verbal communication plays a vital role in Indian classical dance forms, serving as a profound means of expression that transcends linguistic barriers. Rooted in centuries-old traditions, these dance forms utilize intricate hand gestures, facial expressions, body movements, and postures to convey narratives and emotions. Each mudra (hand gesture) and bhava (expression) holds deep symbolic meaning, allowing dancers to communicate complex stories and sentiments without uttering a single word on the stage or sometimes even without the help of lyrics to a song. The precise synchronization of body movements, rhythm, and facial expressions in these dance forms reflects a rich cultural heritage and provides a captivating visual language that resonates with audiences on a profound level. Through the mesmerizing combination of grace, precision, and storytelling, Indian classical dance becomes a powerful medium for non-verbal communication, preserving cultural narratives and fostering a universal connection through the artistry of movement.

There are certain terms that are mentioned even in day to day activities of a performer suggesting the importance of non-verbal communication in the Indian classical dance forms. These terms are, ‘abhinaya’, ‘rasa’, ‘bhava’, ‘vibhava’, ‘anubhava’, ‘vritti’ etc. Even when these few terms are common for a dance guru and a practitioner, these terms may be new for those who do not practice any art form. Several adhyayas of the ‘Natyashastra’ too, a grantha attributed to sage Bharata also refer to the importance of several aspects of abhinaya in almost every adhyaya.

Hand Gestures in Bharatanatyam

The different hand gestures used in Bharatanatyam are Hastas / Mudras (hand gestures) primarily classified as 28 Asamyuta Hastas (one-hand gestures) and 24 Samyuta Hastas (two-hand gestures).

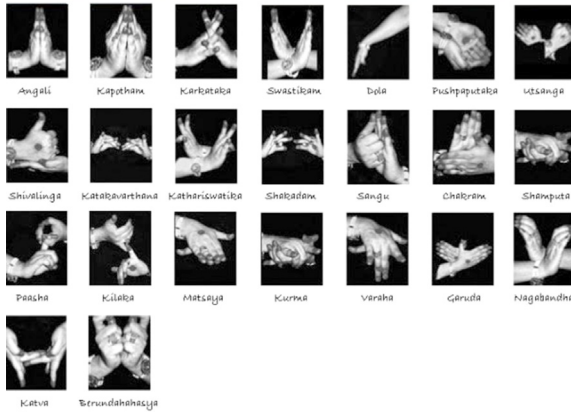
*Pathakas Tripathako Ardhapathakas Kartharimukhaha
Mayoorakhyo Ardhachandrascha Araala Shukathundakaha
Mushtischa Shikharakhyascha Kapitha Katakamukhaha
Suchi Chandrakhala Padmakosha Sarpasirshasthathaa
Mrigashirsha Simhamukhaha Kaangoolascha Alapadmakaha
Chaturu Bhramaraschaiva Hamsasyo Hamsapakshakaha
Sandamsho Mukulaschaiva Thaamrachoodas Trisoolakaha
Ithyaasamyukta Hastanam Ashtavimshati reerita*



(Picture 1. Asamyukta hasta mudras or single hand gestures)

Samyukta Hasta Mudras:

*Anjalishcha Kapoashcha Karkata Swasthikashathaa
Dolahastha Pushpaputaha Utsangah Shivalingakaha
Katakavardhanashchaiva Kartari Swasthikashathaa
Shakatam Shanka Chakrecha Samputa Paasha keelakau
Matsya Kurmo Varaashcha Garudo Nagabandhakaha
Khatwaa Berundakakyescha Ithyethe Sankhyaatha Samyukta
Karaaha*



(Picture 2. Samyukta hasta mudras or double hand gestures)

Research Methodology

For the stated research topic I am applying a mix of research methodologies:

Qualitative Content Analysis: Analyzing textual descriptions, narratives, and interpretations of nonverbal communication elements in Indian classical dance forms from various sources such as academic literature, dance critiques, and historical texts, such as Abhinayadarpan and Natyashastra.

Observational Studies: Conducting direct observations of live Indian classical dance performances to observe and document

nonverbal communication cues including gestures, facial expressions, and body movements.

Interviews: Conducting interviews with experienced dance gurus, and dance practitioners in Indian classical dance to gain insights into their understanding and interpretation of nonverbal communication in dance.

Comparative Analysis: Comparing nonverbal communication patterns and practices across different styles of Indian classical dance to identify commonalities, variations, and unique features.

Scope/Focus of Analysis

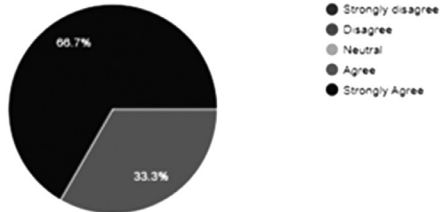
The scope of the topic "An analysis of nonverbal communication in Indian classical dance forms" would likely involve examining the various nonverbal elements employed in Indian classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, and Mohiniyattam. This analysis may delve into aspects such as hand gestures (mudras), facial expressions (abhinaya), body movements (angika abhinaya), eye movements (drishti bheda), posture, and other subtle nuances that convey meaning and emotion in these traditional dance styles. Additionally, the cultural and historical significance of these nonverbal communication techniques within the context of Indian classical dance could also be explored. Along with the stress on what both the practitioners of the dance form and the audience feel about the non-verbal communication in Indian classical dance forms.

What Do the Practitioners of the Art Form Say?

The research scholar follows a very basic research methodology, a survey method for the practitioners of the dance form, a survey method for those who have seen at least a few dance performances and can distinguish between the Indian classical dance forms, and the interviews of the gurus of Indian classical dance form.

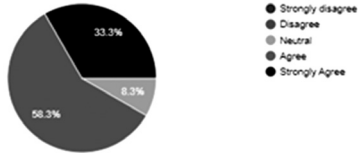
The research scholar connected with 20-odd dance practitioners from across the country. Here are a few answers that the practitioners gave:

3. In the absence of music and verbal communication (narration/commentary/dialogues/lyrics), the abhinaya and the gestures are still able to convey a message.



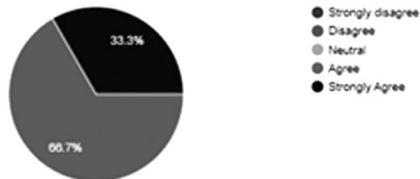
[Pie chart 1. A question answered by respondents: In the absence of music and verbal communication (narration, commentary, dialogues, or lyrics), the abhinaya and the gestures are still able to convey the message]

5. The variety of gestures and their combinations are able to bring out the intended meanings.



[Pie chart 2. The variety of gestures and their combinations are able to bring out the intended meanings]

6. Information, messages and ideas are communicated by the dancer's body to the audience.



[Pie chart 3. Information, messages, and ideas are communicated by the dancer's body to the audience]

Some other questions asked to the performers include: Whether they think information, messages, and ideas are communicated by the dancer's body to the audience or not. Whether Indian classical dance forms convey topics of social importance? Their thoughts on whether gestures, abhinaya, and other elements of non-verbal communication are similar in all Indian classical dance forms, to which over 25 % of the respondents disagreed. Similar such other questions were asked to all the respondents. The respondents selected, have at least been practicing their respective art forms for 5 years. These dancers practice any one of the four Indian classical dance forms namely, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, or Kathakali, owing to even the slightest of similarities between them and also the fact that they originate from the southern states of India.

The research scholar also connected with some eminent gurus of the dance field, that includes: Dr Neena Prasad of Mohiniyattam, Rama Vaidyanathan of Bharatanatyam and Sharmila Biswas of Odissi, and Dr Kishoree Hampiholi of Bharatanatyam. The respondent also aims to connect with the noted guru G Venu practicing, Kudiattam, Kathakali, and Mohiniyattam, the author of 'Mudra'. The questions asked to the gurus were open-ended, so as to benefit from their pool of knowledge.

In the words of Sharmila Biswas, "When we think about non-verbal communication, we first think about 'mudra'. We have stylised the mudra very much." When asked, what are important non-verbal elements according to her, Indian classical dance forms she informed that all elements are important, unless we take a holistic attitude. Biswas has recently also taught a few dance pieces on the music that do not have any lyrics, just the music, the pitch of the song changes according to the emotion of the nayika.

Rama Vaidyanathan and Dr Neena Prasad too shared the nuances of the abhinaya along with the research scholar in a one-to-one interview during a dance retreat. According to Rama

Vaidyanathan, “The mythological stories is the main message which is there to contain, the tenets of Hindu philosophy, along with these stories, we are also talking about the whole thing of Jivatma and Parmatma, which is the main part of Indian classical dance which we cannot take away. These are the main aspects of life in general which are conveyed using the non-verbal communication elements.” She was of the opinion that there is absolutely no message that cannot be communicated through dance. “We have to understand that the human body itself is very adept at communication. The Stone Age man communicated using various body parts before even the language was discovered. Communication through any limb of the body is possible. The race is like that. What dance does is it codifies it and gives it a structure and then we do all the hastas and all the movements required to communicate,” said Rama Vaidyanathan. She said, in non-verbal communication, the music which does not use sahitya, is very important for dance, after that everything else comes which includes, stage, lights, costumes, etc. Lights and props cannot be ignored even if they are new-age things. It is important in some contexts to use props and lights which can be used aesthetically.”

Dr Neena Prasad, Mohiniyattam guru said, “Our Indian philosophy reflects in Indian art forms where truth and beauty is established as Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram. All the issues, even the big social issues today can be conveyed using the Indian classical dance forms. In Indian classical dance forms, you have a technique to be followed. In Kerala art forms we have a rigid way for the application of Natya, and we have rigid bodily kinetics, including the usage of eyes and upangas. It has been prevalent in the region for over 2500 years. When you make a hand gesture there are also eyes supporting it and meaning will be enhanced through portrayal. More developed natya absolutely conveys the message. Dance is more than conveying the message. There is more anubhava within the portrayal that needs to be conveyed.”

Dr Kishoree Hampiholi, a Bharatanatyam guru too emphasized the importance of non-verbal elements in Indian classical dance forms. Her dance troupe has produced several dance dramas, such as Ramayana, Bhasmasur Mohini, Abhigyan Shakuntalam, Taj Mahal, Ritusamharam, etc. Every dance drama had a particular aesthetic setting and different makeup and costumes. She noted that in order to convey the message, these elements have to be taken into consideration, the Ravana must look like Ravan on stage, and this can be achieved only through the make-up and costume. The music too should then be supportive of the character; calm music representing spring may be good for the portrayal of Rama but cannot be used for the character of Rama.

All the gurus were of the opinion that non-verbal elements of communication such as music, make-up, stage setting, and props along with abhinaya, rasa, and bhava, do play an important role in all the Indian classical dance forms.

Language is a communication system consisting of formal units that are integrated through the process of a combination of components such as sound gestures and meaning that are expressed through the aspects of non-verbal communication. People convey meaning not only through spoken language but also through gestures, facial expressions, and body postures. This non-verbal communication makes use of gestures particularly facial expressions, and eye contact. This non-verbal communication also consists of unique and common behavioral patterns. And dance definitely has this language that goes hand in hand with gestures, facial expressions, and body postures.

In the year 1886 B.C -“La Society de Linguistique de Paris”, thought that language originated through:

- a. Imitation theory
- b. Reciprocating theory
- c. Gesture language theory

We are concerned majorly with the Gesture language theory. The gestural theory of language evolution states that the languages that humans speak today arose from an earlier form of communication that was expressed primarily through arm and hand gestures. This theory suggests that before languages were spoken today, the ancient man heavily relied on gestures. Hence a conclusion can be drawn that non-verbal elements of communication majorly are responsible to convey the message to the audience in the context of the Indian classical dance forms.

Potential Practical Applications of the Research Topic

Cultural preservation: Understanding the nuances of nonverbal communication in Indian classical dance forms can contribute to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. It can aid in the documentation and dissemination of traditional dance techniques and gestures, ensuring their continuity for future generations.

Enhanced pedagogy: Insights gained from the analysis can inform dance pedagogy by providing instructors with a deeper understanding of how to effectively teach and convey nonverbal communication elements to students. This can improve the quality of dance education.

Performance enhancement: Dancers and choreographers can benefit from the research findings by refining their performances through a heightened awareness and mastery of nonverbal communication techniques. This can lead to more expressive and impactful dance presentations.

Communication training: Professionals in fields such as education, counseling, and public speaking can benefit from insights into non-verbal communication gleaned from Indian classical dance. They can incorporate techniques learned from the analysis to improve their own nonverbal communication skills and better connect with their audiences.

Social and community development: Indian classical dance forms often serve as vehicles for social cohesion and community engagement. Understanding the role of non-verbal communication in these dances can facilitate community-building activities, cultural exchanges, and collaborative artistic endeavors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of non-verbal communication in Indian classical dance forms, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, and Mohiniyattam unveils a rich mosaic of cultural expression and storytelling. The intricate movements, gestures, facial expressions, and body language of the dancer or performer serve as a nuanced language that goes beyond verbal communication. This paper analysing the non-verbal communication in Indian classical dance forms underscores the significance of non-verbal communication in conveying emotions, narratives, and cultural nuances. Beyond just physical movements, Indian classical dance forms illustrate a connection between tradition and artistic expression. As we speak with several noted gurus from the field, and read further we gain a deeper understanding of the cultural heritage embedded with every gesture. The study contributes to the broader discourse on the power of non-verbal communication as a potent means of expression, providing insights into the profound beauty and communicative prowess inherent in the traditional dance forms of India.

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