
**Bharata Muni as a Microcosm of Cosmic Emanation:
Sustaining, Offering and Expanding Nāṭya through Icchā,
Jñāna, and Kriyā***Poorvam International Journal of Creative Arts and Cultural Expressions*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Bharata Muni through a traditional śāstrika lens, moving beyond historical debates to interpret him as a cosmic principle of performative knowledge (nāṭya-jñāna). Using Sanskrit philological analysis, the study unpacks the name Bharata as bharati-rāti-tanoti (sustains-offers-expands), revealing a microcosmic model of cosmic emanation functioning through icchā (will), jñāna (knowledge), and kriyā (action).

The analysis demonstrates how Bharata represents not merely an individual scholar but a community of artists—a sampradāya embodying the dharma of manifesting and offering theatrical knowledge for collective benefit. Drawing from the Nāṭyaśāstra, Abhinavabhāratī, Upanishads, and dharmaśāstra texts, the paper establishes connections between aesthetic theory and spiritual goals, positioning nāṭya as a means to transcend material existence and achieve Self-realization.

The study reveals how Bharata's system transforms both performers and spectators through rasa (aesthetic experience), leading from material engagement to spiritual awakening. This interpretation emphasizes nāṭya's role as dharmic practice rather than mere entertainment, offering a framework for understanding Indian performance traditions as vehicles for mokṣa (liberation) through the integration of artistic excellence with spiritual discipline.

Keywords:

Bharata Muni, Nāṭyaśāstra, Rasa, Dharma, Mokṣa

Editorial Note:

This volume presents a lecture on Bharata Muni delivered at the Amrit Yuva Kalotsav 2024, organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi at Kala Academy, Goa. Part of a series on foundational figures of Indian classical arts, the lecture explores Bharata Muni—author of the Nāṭyaśāstra—through a traditional śāstrika lens.

Rather than debating his historicity, the speaker interprets Bharata as a cosmic principle of performative knowledge (nāṭya-jñāna), using Sanskrit philology to unpack the name Bharata as bharati-rāti-tanoti (sustains-offers-expands). Drawing from the Nāṭyaśāstra, Abhinavabhāratī, Upanishads, and dharmasāstra texts, the paper aligns aesthetic theory with spiritual goals like dharma, rasa, and mokṣa.

This is not just a scholarly text but a living dialogue with tradition. Sanskrit terms appear with transliteration and translation. Readers unfamiliar with these concepts may consult the reference list provided.

This text preserves the oral character of the original lecture, including direct addresses to the audience and traditional Sanskrit invocations. The title is given by the Editorial Team.

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Bharata Muni as a Microcosm of Cosmic Emanation: Sustaining, Offering and Expanding Nāṭya through Icchā, Jñāna, and Kriyā¹

Shri Piyaal Bhattacharya

Namaste, everyone!

I render my veneration to all the masters and seniors, and my greetings to all the dignitaries present here. I am humbled to speak on Bharata Muni and see it as a privilege. I thank Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, from the bottom of my heart for giving me this opportunity. My humble gratitude to Dr. Sandhya Purecha, the Chairman, and Shri Raju Das, the Secretary of Sangeet Natak Akademi. It is indeed a novel task to understand Bharata Muni during this ‘Amrit Kaal’, as I sincerely feel that it is crucial to empower us to reflect on the Indian performance traditions under a new light, and help us to determine newer paths to contribute back to the pool.

In today’s time, as someone begins to know about Bharata Muni and understand his treatise, they may come across a lot of prevalent presuppositions. In pre- as well as post-Independent India, a few Indic scholars, alongside some of their contemporaries abroad, began translating Bharata Muni’s text into European and other modern Indian languages. They intended to bring the repository of knowledge embedded in there and an intricate, documented system of Indian dramaturgy to the fore. In that due course, they expressed a few doubts – Who was Bharata? Was he a lone person, just as the number of the word suggests? Or was it the name of an erstwhile clan or community? The questions were not alien, they said, and pointed at the textual pieces of evidence to corroborate their rumination. The śāstrika system of studying, however, never had any such deliberation insofar as modern Indic scholars of Indology and later from the South Asian studies, who had apprehensions about the traditional Indian way of looking at Bharata Muni. The second set of apprehensions was raised by some modern practitioners – how should we embrace Bharata? Should we stick to the text itself as it is, or treat it as a treatise on tradition? Or better still, is Bharata Muni binding us and restricting us with his prescriptions or opening a new vista?

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Rather than debating his historicity, the speaker interprets Bharata as a cosmic principle of performative knowledge (*nāṭya-jñāna*), using Sanskrit philology to unpack the name *Bharata* as *bharati-rāti-tanoti* (sustains-offers-expands). Drawing from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Abhinavabhāratī*, Upanishads, and *dharmaśāstra* texts, the paper aligns aesthetic theory with spiritual goals like *dharma*, *rasa*, and *mokṣa*.

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The illuminated minds in the following times came together and tried to reconcile many such queries. We see Sangeet Natak Akademi organising a grand seminar on Natyashastra under the able guidance of Premlata Sharma, the convenor, and Girish Karnad, then Chairman. We also see Kapila Vatsyayan, following the line of her teacher Vasudeva Sharan Agrawal unequivocally clarifying that the thrust should not be on proving or disproving whether Bharata Muni was a single person as it may have a multitude of meanings – what is most important here is to understand that more than willing to posit himself as an individual, Bharata Muni is trying to offer himself not as an authoritative figure but as an instrument (*karana*) through whom a larger plethora of knowledge (*jñāna*) will be get emanated. Thus, the personal Bharata Muni is not important here; rather, the history of discourse and system unfolded through his speech is. This has always been the demarcating feature in the tradition of Indian streams of knowledge – the *śāstrakartās*, the *ṛṣis* never emphasised the *ādhāra* as they themselves were, but focused more on the *ādheya* – the *jñāna* which is manifested through them, for which the supreme unconditioned I-consciousness is the spring. In the same line neither it is neither important to detect the physical time when Bharata Muni lived.

Here, one idea should be pellucid – the empirical time we may go back to, only denotes one point of time when the act of physical documentation of the knowledge took place in some particular geographical space. As per the social-ethnographers, the act of carrying that knowledge forward dates back much further, whereas in the case of the traditional Indian system, that purview, too, will render inadequate as *jñāna* is *anādi* – it resides in the *hṛdaya* of the Supreme Being and only manifests the causal, subtle and palpable world with its *icchā* or Universal Will. We shall come back to this in a while.

Talking about the naming of Bharata, we, again, find another widely accepted notion of treating Bharata as an acronym – Bha-Ra-Ta. Following the 18th century textual exposition of **Balarāma Bhāratam** by Maharaja Balarama Varma, this notion treats Bha

coming from *bhāva*, Ra from *rāga*, and Ta from *tāla*. However, I shall not follow this line of understanding as well.

Today, I would like to understand Bharata Muni from another *śāstrika* point of view and would try to establish the relevance of Bharata Muni's vision in regard to contemporary times.

The way the word '*Bhairava*' is understood may help us to pave the path. भरति रवति वमति यः – he who sustains the creation, pulsates and emanates everything is *Bhairava*. And quite similarly, he who fills and sustains (*bharati*), offers it to the others (*rāti*) and expands it (*tanoti*) is Bharata – भरति रति तनोति यः, सः भरतः । What does he sustain? – the *jñāna* of *nāṭya*. What does he offer? – that same illuminating knowledge of *nāṭya*. What does he expand? – The blissful experience of *rasa*.

Now, stating them in such simplistic fashion may sound easy, nevertheless, the connotation is far profound. Let's focus on each one of them in sequence to acquire a vivid perception about Bharata.

In the 36th chapter of **Nāṭyaśāstra**, we find Bharata Muni expounding something intriguing –

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धुर्यवदेको यस्मादुद्धारोऽनेकभूमिकायुक्तः ।
भाण्डग्रहोपकरणैनाट्यं भरतो भवेत् तस्मात् ॥२३॥²

So, we can very well comprehend that Bharata here is nothing but a vessel, the *ādhāra*. There, within the *ādhāra* of the body, one bears the characters. To rephrase – भरति भूमिकान्स्वाङ्गे यः, सः भरतोत्युच्यते³ ।

Quite intriguingly, Bharata represents a microcosmic model of cosmic emanation functioning on *icchā-jñāna-kriyā*. All the possibility of the *jñāna* of *nāṭya* lies in repose within him. It is with his will (*icchā*) to offer them, the characters get manifested, and thus, the body of *nāṭya* begins to get expanded. So, this *icchā* results in *dāna* – an active participation – a *sakarmaka dhatu* – √रा आदत्ते । This Bharata, or Bharatas, will continue to offer *nāṭya* to keep the stream of *jñāna* enriched.

Therefore, we can see how Bharata in one way stands for not any mere ancient Indian individual scholar but a community of artists – a *sampradāya* of actors, dancers, poets, musicians. This ideation represents a worldview and a mechanism – the *jñāna* is *anādi*, it is only manifested just as it is manifested at the arousal of Universal Will (*icchā*) and manifests everything with *kriyā*. What may be seen out there can very well be seen in here – यथा ब्रह्माण्डे तथा भाण्डे ।⁴

This act of offering or *dāna* is important as that immediately invokes the memory of *yajña*. *Dāna* has been an inseparable part of the *satra* of *yajña*. “In order to produce something”, says Shatavadhani R. Ganesh, “we have to work hard and, having produced it, we should share it.” This hard work alludes to the notion of *tapas*, and the *phala* is not just for one to enjoy but to share for the benefit of all sentient beings. This is why we find Parāśara Smṛiti eulogising *dāna* –

तपः परं कृतयुगे त्रेतायां ज्ञानमुच्यते ।
द्वापरे यज्ञमेवाहुर्दानमेकं कलौ युगे ॥ २३ ॥ (प्रथमोऽध्यायः)⁵

Now we may also grasp why Ācārya Abhinavagupta expounded on the *naṭadharmatva* in the Abhinavabhāratī, his commentary on Bharata Muni’s *Nāṭyaśāstra*, as the name ‘Bharata’ itself puts forth a *dharma* – the *dharma* of manifesting the *jñāna* of *nāṭya* and offering it for the benefit of the commoners, as once the *jñāna* of *nāṭya* was emanated by Brahmā in a *drśya-śravya* medium. This *dāna* must not be mere entertainment, for Bharata is not laying the foundation of something as trivial as recreation since it was manifested by Brahmā with a completely different purpose –

² Translation: Who can pull off performing multiple characters in one go, just as a fit bearer of loads, who is adept in playing the percussions and sustaining the required elements of *nāṭya*, is to be called Bharata.

³ Translation: He who embodies roles within himself is called Bharata.

⁴ Translation: As in the cosmos, so in the pot (in the body).

⁵ Translation: In the *Satya yuga*, performing austerity was the highest form of *dharma*, in *Tretā*, that became the acquiring of *jñāna*, whereas in *Dvāpara* it lay in performing *yajña* and in *Kaliyuga* it resides in the act of philanthropy.

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धर्म्यमर्थ्यं यशस्यं च सोपदेश्यं ससङ्ग्रहम् ।
भविष्यतश्च लोकस्य सर्वकर्मानुदर्शकम् ॥ १४ ॥⁶

सर्वशात्रार्थसम्पन्नं सर्वशिल्पप्रवर्तकम् ।
नाट्याख्यं पञ्चमं वेदं सेतिहासं करोम्यहम् ॥ १५ ॥⁷

It may be viewed as an edutainment, if to put it in today's terms, and not mere recreation. Ācārya Abhinavagupta emphasises 'विद् धातु ज्ञाने' to comprehend *nāṭya* or all art forms as Veda, and makes us aware that Bharata Muni is not merely asking a *naṭa* to sing and dance to make merry –

न चाप्यस्योपदिश्यते 'गायेत्, नृत्येत्' इति ।⁸

He demarcates this system of practice as the *dharma* for the *naṭa sampradāya* –

नटानां तावदेतत् स्वधर्माग्नायरूपतया अनुष्ठेयमेव ।⁹

So, comprehending the true connotation of Bharata will continue to take us away from any feeling of losing something, as the act of giving is not associated with insecurity. That understanding may also lead us to refrain from the unwanted foliage of vanity or exhibitionism, as the performing arts sometimes pose to be in the contemporary world. The act of practising art must be undertaken modestly.

What is the kind of *dāna* suggested by the *ra* of the word Bharata? It is the Supreme kind of offering of all offerings – taking one to the path of Self-realisation. In the 36th chapter, Bharata says –

या गतिर्वेदविदुषां या गतिर्यज्ञकारिणाम् ।
या गतिर्दानशीलानां तां गतिं प्राप्नुयाद्धि सः ॥ २७ ॥¹⁰

दानधर्मेषु सर्वेषु कीर्त्यते तु महत् फलम् ।
प्रेक्षणीयप्रदानं हि सर्वदानेषु शस्यते ॥ २८ ॥¹¹

गान्धर्वं चेह नाट्यं च यः सम्यक् परिपालयेत् ।
स ईश्वरगणेशानां लभते सद्गतिं पराम् ॥ ३० ॥¹²

⁶ Translation: That which is righteous, purposeful, and brings fame; instructive and comprehensive; and which will serve as a guide for all future human actions— such is this (work).

⁷ Translation: Endowed with the essence of all śāstras and the source of all arts, I create the fifth Veda called Nāṭya, complete with history (itihāsa).

⁸ Translation: Nor is it instructed in this (text) that one should merely 'sing' or 'dance.'

⁹ Translation: For actors, this alone must be performed properly according to their own prescribed duty (svadharma)

¹⁰ Translation: The final avenue of liberation, which is walked by the true realiser of Veda, by the true knower-performer of *yajña*, by the one renowned for charity, is also offered to the one who offers the *jñāna* of *nāṭya*

¹¹ Translation: All eulogise the act of philanthropy to be the bestower of great fruit, whereas offering *nāṭya* is the highest among all such activities.

¹² Translation: Should one sustain the practice and wisdom of *gāndharva* and *nāṭya* properly, they attain the rightful passage of life, i.e. liberation (*mokṣa*).

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Now, at this juncture, let us understand *dharma* in this context. Many have opted for a much linear translation ‘duty’ for *dharma*, whereas duty is just one bit of *dharma* – it is rather an essence of sustainability which forms the core of *dharma*, so what we get to learn from Bharata is the sustenance of a knowledge-stem flowing since time immemorial for the benefit of many beings – बहुजन सुखाय बहुजन हिताय च¹³ ।

This principle of sustenance must also be practised, which incites the aspect of *sādhana* or *tapas*. Bharata Muni himself epitomises the notion of *śiṣya* – he is a learner who learns the wisdom of performance from Brahṃā, the art of *kaiśikī vṛtti* from Nandīkeśvara; he never jumps the gun, yet indulges in creative expression of art whilst adhering to the *śāstrika* parameters. His own activities within the treatise of Nāṭyaśāstra aid us in grasping the true meaning of *śāstra* and its necessity – *śāstra* “helps us remain within a time-tested framework and prevents us from slipping away.” Śaṅkarācārya says, the sole purpose of *śāstra* is to help us, since it is the essential reminder for us and not an enforcer of activities.

ज्ञापकं हि शास्त्रं न कारकमेति स्थितिः (भाष्य, बृहदारण्यकोपनिषद् १.४.१०)¹⁴

Thus, we may actually rediscover the word ‘Bharata’ as the distinguishing marker for the *dharma* of the *naṭas* (नटधर्मत्वपरिच्छेदकः).

We have so far discussed *bharati* and *rāti* for Bha and Ra. Now, let us move towards *tanoti* for Ta. What does Bharata or the Bharatas expand? They expand the body of *nāṭya* through their own bodies, and as a result expand *rasa*, which is *akhaṇḍa*. It is interesting how the same root *tan* renders two aspects quintessential to *nāṭya*—*tanu* and *tantrī*. A strike on the stringed instrument creates an expansion of *āhata nāda*, but it fades away after a certain span of time. In the same way, our body also gets manifested and then decays and finally gets into oblivion – Bhartṛhari in the **Vākyapadīya** says –

अध्याहितकलां यस्य कालशक्तिमुपाश्रिताः ।
जन्मादयो विकाराः षड्भावभेदस्य योनयः ॥ १.३ ॥¹⁵

Ever since birth, we go through sustenance and growth, before maturing, decay, and ultimately our physical body gets dissolved in the *pañca-bhūtas*. Likewise, the body of the *nāṭya* gets expanded. A treatment is found in the **Daśarūpaka** where we see how, on the basis of *pañca-arthaprakṛti* and *pañca-avasthā*, the body of *nāṭya* gets expanded. The treatment, much curiously, is alike a body. The body of *nāṭya* that is *kathāvastu* is referred to as *śārīra*. The five states or *pañca-avasthā* render the psychological state of the characters –

¹³ Translation: For the happiness of the many, for the welfare of the many.

¹⁴ Translation: Scripture is revelatory (indicative), not causative — this is the established view.

¹⁵ Translation: He, into whom all the arts (*kalāḥ*) are infused, and whose power of Time (*kāla-śakti*) is the basis

From whom arise the transformations beginning with birth, the sources of the sixfold modes of being.

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अवस्थाः पञ्च कार्यस्य प्रारब्धस्य फलार्थिभिः।
आरम्भयत्नप्राप्त्याशानियताप्तिफलागमाः॥ १९ ॥¹⁶

The struggle, the ascension and descension creating such states are the fruits of the *prārabdha* or deeds of the characters. What is intended here is to render a multi-faceted fruit of watching the performance of *kathāvastu* in *nāṭya* – the first layer is becoming aware by observing the toils of the characters and acting justly. If properly done, one may enjoy the fruit of the good deeds as shown in the performances. This is the layer of *dharma* and *artha*. The savouring of the visual aesthetic, the mellifluous tune of the music

emits a pleasurable experience for the *prekṣakas*. This corresponds to satiating *kama*. However, as the *kavi* employs the *pañca-arthaprakṛti* (*bīja-bindu-patākā-prakarī-kārya*) to craft the *avasthā* of the characters, one realises, both by performing and witnessing, how fleeting can be any joy, how momentary can be any rejoice, and so how empty they are. Receiving such impetus over and over again may render a sense of detachment from the fruits of one's actions or experience impersonalisation in their enactment, just as **Bhāgavad Gītā** says—

दुःखेष्वनुद्विग्नमनाः सुखेषु विगतस्पृहः ।
वीतरागभयक्रोधः स्थितधीर्मुनिरुच्यते ॥ (श्रीमद्भागवद्गीता २.५६)¹⁷

This may prepare one to be a *jivanmukta* – the state of being liberated during one's lifetime.

The *śarīra* of *nāṭya* consists of five joints, just like a human body – *mukha*, *garbha*, etc., to give not just the psychological rendition but also a physical sense of the body. In this way, with the joints and inner (*antaḥkaraṇa*) and outer body (*bhogāyatana śarīra*), the aspect of *tanoti* of Bharata's name really treats the body as a tool to attain liberation. It becomes the instrument – *karaṇa*, for that. No wonder Bharata's system upholds such a practice of *āṅgikābhinaya* through *karaṇa*, which takes the practitioners beyond the dichotomy of *heya* and *upādeya*, and turns their physical bodies into *naivedya*, and in the end, attains the body of Śiva that is a complete transcendence from the physical space to no space!

The naming of the *sandhis* of *itivr̥tta* as per the limbs of the human body also alludes to the cycle of cosmic time and universe as the manifested cosmic body of the Supreme Being – *Puruṣa*, as depicted in the *Puruṣa sūktam*. The **Nāṭyaśāstra**, being a part of the *śāstrika* system, also compels one to join the dots and arrive at the greater schema of time, where empirical time becomes insignificant. All these realisations happen for both the spectators and the actors in Bharata's system, not through any arid journey but through a joyous experience of *rasa* – the aesthetic experience of savouring art. Thus, *rasa* takes us from the material to the spiritual, which finally culminates in corresponding, says

¹⁶ Translation: The five stages of an undertaken action (*kārya*), pursued by those desiring its result, are: initiation (*ārambha*), effort (*yatna*), attainment (*prāpti*), expectation (*āśā*), certainty of attainment (*niyatāpti*), and receipt of the result (*phalāgama*).

¹⁷ Translation: He whose mind is undisturbed in sorrow, who is free from desire in pleasure, who is devoid of attachment, fear, and anger — such a sage of steady wisdom is called *sthita-dhīḥ* (one of steady intellect).

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Shatavadhani R. Ganesh, and in becoming *Brahman*. This is the ultimate goal of Bharata's *nāṭya* – रसो वै सः, सः वै रसिकः¹⁸ –

to attain the realisation that we all have come out of that Unconditioned Bliss and in the end shall go back to that Supreme Bliss –

आनन्दाध्येव खल्विमानि भूतानि जायन्ते। आनन्देन जातानि जीवन्ति । आनन्दं
प्रेयन्त्यभिसंविशन्तीति ।¹⁹
- (तैत्तिरीयोपनिषद्, भृगुवल्ली, षष्ठोऽनुवाकः - १)

In today's time of recurrent bout of emotional upheavals and incessant pull of rat-race, it is important to keep the head straight with such reminder in an endearing way – that is the way of *nāṭya*'s teaching – to impart *kāntā-sammita upadeśa* – so that none's ego is hurt and they take the medicine mixed with jaggery.

To conclude, let us see another illuminating layer – the status of Bharata as 'Muni'. The writings in English on Bharata Muni or referring to his text many a time omit this 'Muni'. Withstanding the gravity, one may falsely recognise it to be a mere act of veneration added in the later days. However, it is not so. Whenever Indian traditions refer to anyone who has divulged the ultimate truth or *Brahmavidyā* of any particular knowledge-stem has been regarded with such reverence. These ultimate sayings are called the *āptavākyas*. The same kind of venerating remarks can also be found in the *Abhinavabhāratī* where Ācārya Abhinavagupta refers to Bharata Muni's sayings as '*ādivākya*' and refers to them as unsurmountable. The same kind of veneration is also observed for Pāṇini, Kātyāyana, and Patañjali in the case of *vyākaraṇa*. They are called the *ārṣa ācārya* who have revealed the *apauruṣeya jñāna* to be carried forward and used as an igniting means for Self-realisation. And so, they are not to be treated in an individualistic sense at any given point in time.

In this way, the layered meaning of the word Bharata may be understood. As Bharata Muni himself has drawn the analogy of *bīja* and *vrkṣa* several times in his

treatise, his name itself is found to be enacting like a seed, and this body of the text and its practice are the tree sprouted from there. If in this way we try to understand Bharata Muni, we can definitely begin to stride on the path of sustaining the invaluable, intangible repository of Indian knowledge systems and move closer towards realising our true Self, and through this process help Bharatavarsh to awake to a new *svarga*.

Thank you!

References

¹⁸ Translation: Indeed, He (Brahman) is Rasa. He alone is the rasika

¹⁹ Translation: From Bliss (Ānanda) indeed are all these beings born.

By Bliss, having been born, do they live.

Into Bliss they enter and merge at the end.

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