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The Nandi-Prastāvanā In Kālidāsa's Three Dramas— (Abhijñānaśākuntalam, Mālavikāgnimitram, And Vikramorvaśīyam:) A Comparative Study With Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra

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Abstract

The *Nandi-prastāvanā*, the ritual invocation that opens Sanskrit drama, is prescribed by Bharata in his *Nāṭyaśāstra* as a consecratory and dramaturgical device intended to establish, auspiciousness and orienting the audience toward the intended *Rasa*. Kālidāsa, in his three extant plays—*Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, *Mālavikāgnimitram*, and *Vikramorvaśīyam*—adapts this tradition with poetic refinement, aligning invocations to Śiva with the thematic sensitivity and emotional core of each drama. The present paper undertakes a comparative study of Kālidāsa's *Nandi* verses and *prastāvanās* in relation to Bharata's dramaturgical prescriptions, analyzing their ritual, aesthetic, and narrative functions. Through textual analysis and correlation with the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, it demonstrates that Kālidāsa not only preserves the ritual significance of the *Nandi* but also transforms it into artistic prelude, embedding thematic foreshadowing, *rasa* orientation, and symbolic imagery within the invocatory verses. The paper further examines the structure of the *Prastāvanā*, the role of the *Sūtradhāra*, and the application of dramatic devices such as *Prayogātīśaya* and *Vīthy-aṅgas*. In addition, the study explores the modern relevance of *Nandi*, drawing parallels with contemporary theatre prologues, cinematic openings, organizational rituals, and pedagogical practices. The paper establishes that Kālidāsa harmonizes Bharata's dramaturgical principles with poetic innovation, elevating the *Nandi prastāvanā* into a timeless structural archetype that preserves dramaturgical wisdom while transcending cultural and historical boundaries.

Keywords: Nāṭyaśāstra, Nandi-prastāvanā, Kālidāsa, Sanskrit Drama, Bharata, Sūtradhāra, Rasa, Sanskrit Poetics, Dramaturgy, Prayogātīśaya, Classical Theatre.

Introduction

The *Nandi-prastāvanā* in Kālidāsa's dramas closely reflects Bharata's prescriptions in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, functioning as both ritual invocation and as a dramaturgical device intended to establish *rasa*, auspiciousness, and audience orientation. Kālidāsa adapts this traditional framework with poetic artistry, aligning the invocatory verses with the thematic and emotional core of each drama.

The *Prastāvanā* (prologue) occupies a significant structural position in Sanskrit drama, as it introduces the dramatic context, prepares the audience, and establishes the aesthetic atmosphere necessary for performance. Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* classifies several types of *Prastāvanā*, including *Udghātyaka* (curtain-raising dialogue), *Prarocanā* (persuasive introduction), and *Nandi* (ritual invocation). Among these, the *Nandi-prastāvanā* holds a central place as the consecratory opening of the dramatic performance.

Bharata defines the *Nandi* as follows:

आशीर्वचनसंयुक्ता नित्यं यस्मात्प्रवर्तते। देवद्विजनृपादीनां तस्मान्नान्दीति संज्ञिता॥

(Nāṭyaśāstra 5.24)

This verse establishes that the *Nandi* is a blessing (*āśīrvacana*) directed toward deities, Brahmins, kings, and other auspicious entities, and that it is therefore named "Nandi." Its function is essential: Its primary function is to sanctify the stage, invoke auspiciousness, and prepare the audience for the experience of *rasa*.

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Kālidāsa adapts this ritual framework with poetic innovation. His invocations are not only blessings but also thematic preludes that suggest the dominant *rasa* of each play. Thus, the *Nandi-prastāvanā* in Kālidāsa's works represents a harmonious fusion of ritual necessity and literary artistry.

Objectives

The present study pursues three primary objectives:

- To analyze Kālidāsa's poetic use of *Nandi-prastāvanā*.
- To correlate Kālidāsa's practice with Bharata's dramaturgical framework, highlighting continuities and creative adaptations.
- To examine the thematic and aesthetic functions of the *Nandi* in Sanskrit drama.
- To highlight the continuing relevance of Sanskrit dramaturgy in contemporary literary and theatrical contexts.

Methodology

The present study adopts a comparative and textual methodology. Primary emphasis is placed on the close reading of Kālidāsa's *Nandi* verses in their original Sanskrit form, with particular attention to linguistic structure, poetic imagery, dramaturgical function, and thematic suggestion. These verses are systematically compared with Bharata's prescriptions in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in order to identify continuities, innovations, and aesthetic adaptations. The study also incorporates interpretive analysis relevant to contemporary performance studies and literary criticism.

Literature Review

The study of the *Nandi-prastāvanā* has drawn attention from both classical commentators and modern scholars. Classical Commentators like, Abhinavagupta, in his *Abhinavabhāratī* commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, underscores the ritual necessity of the *Nandi*. He interprets it not merely as a formal prayer but as a dramaturgical act that consecrates the stage, removes obstacles (*vighna*), and ensures the proper reception of *rasa*. He emphasizes the ritual and psychological function in preparing the audience's mind for aesthetic experience. Other commentators, including Śāradātanaya and later dramatists, reinforce this perspective, emphasizing the continuity of ritual invocation in Sanskrit theatre.

Modern Scholars such as A. B. Keith and M. Winternitz observed Kālidāsa's poetic expansions of ritual forms, noting that his invocations transcend ritual necessity and serve as artistic preludes. V. Raghavan, in his extensive studies on Sanskrit drama, argues that Kālidāsa's *Nandi* verses exemplify the fusion of ritual and poetry, simultaneously sanctifying the stage and proposing thematic concerns. Collectively, these scholars recognize Kālidāsa's unique ability to elevate the *Nandi* into a literary device that bridges ritual and narrative.

Critical editions and translations of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Manomohan Ghosh and Adya Rangacharya highlight Bharata's insistence that the *Nandi* sanctifies the stage and sets the dominant *rasa*. These studies provide the

theoretical foundation against which Kālidāsa's practice can be measured.

Despite these contributions, few works systematically compare Kālidāsa's *Nandi* verses with Bharata's dramaturgical framework in a sustained manner. Existing scholarship often treats the *Nandi* either as ritual ornament or poetic flourish, without fully analyzing its dual function as prescribed by Bharata and adapted by Kālidāsa. This gap stresses on the need for a comparative study that situates Kālidāsa's invocations within the ritual-aesthetic continuum of Sanskrit drama.

3. Textual Analysis

नान्दी श्लोक

Acharya Bharata, in the fifth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, under the section concerning the completion of the invocation of joy (*harṣādi nivédana-samāpti-hetu pūrvāṃśa*), has described the *Nandi*—the benedictory verse recited at the beginning of a drama. In the great treatise *Nāṭyaśāstra*, ten main forms of dramatic composition (*daśarūpaka*), some sub-forms are found amongst which *Nāṭakam* (drama), *Troṭaka-* (farce) are to be noted.

Nandi Ślokas in Kālidāsa's Dramas

Kālidāsa's three dramas begin with highly refined *Nandi* verses that simultaneously fulfill ritual and aesthetic purposes.

Mālavikāgnimitram

एकैश्वर्यस्थितोपि प्रणतबहुफलो यः स्वयं कृत्तिवासाः
कान्तासंमिश्रदेहोप्यविषयमनसां यः पुरस्ताच्चतीनाम् ।
अष्टाभिर्यस्य कृत्स्नं जगदपि तनुभिर्बिभ्रतो नाभिमानः
सन्मार्गालोकनाय व्यपनयतु स नस्तामसीं वृत्तिमीशः ॥ १ ॥

The invocation praises Lord Śiva as the cosmic lord who dispels darkness and guides beings toward righteousness. The verse establishes auspiciousness while also anticipating themes of sovereignty and love. (नान्द्यन्ते)

Vikramorvaśīyam

वेदान्तेषु यमाहुरेकपुरुषं व्याप्य स्थितं रोदसी
यस्मिन्नीश्वर इतनन्यविषयः शब्दो यथार्थाक्षरः ।
अन्तर्यश्च मुमुक्षुभिर्नियमितप्राणादिभिर्मृग्यते
स स्थाणुः स्थिरभक्तियोगसुलभो निःश्रेयसायास्तु वः ॥1॥

(नान्द्यन्ते)

This verse presents Śiva as the supreme cosmic reality described in the Vedānta. The invocation establishes spiritual grandeur while indicating the divine and transcendent dimension of the drama.

Abhijñānaśākuntalam

या सृष्टिः स्रष्टुराद्या वहति विधिहुतं या हविर्या च होत्री
ये द्वे कालं विधत्तः श्रुतिविषयगुणा या स्थिता व्याप्य विश्वम् ।
यामाहुः सर्वबीजप्रकृतिरिति यया प्राणिनः प्राणवन्तः
प्रत्यक्षाभिः प्रपन्नस्तनुभिरवतु वस्ताभिरष्टाभिरीशः ॥ १ ॥

(नान्द्यन्ते)

The verse invokes Śiva through his eight cosmic manifestations (*Aṣṭamūrti*). The imagery of fertility,

cosmic order, and creation symbolically anticipates Śākuntalā's role as mother and the birth of Bharata. The above verses are called *Nandi* as each *śloka* ends with the word “नान्द्यन्ते.” The analysis of these *Nandi ślokas* is as follows:

(a) Auspicious Benediction

All three *Nandi* verses fulfill Bharata's requirement that the invocation should establish auspiciousness and praise divine powers.

(b) Recitation and Performance by the *Sūtradhāra*

Kālidāsa's plays do not explicitly mention who recites the *Nāndi śloka*. The expression “नान्द्यन्ते सूत्रधारः” indicates that the *Sūtradhāra* enters after the *Nāndi*, while the dialogue phrase “अलमतिवितरेण” further suggests that he is not its reciter. If the *Sūtradhāra* himself had recited the *Nāndi*, the text would more appropriately read “नान्द्यन्ते पुनः सूत्रधारः।”

(c) Metrical Structure

The third characteristic of the *Nāndi śloka* is that it should contain eight or twelve *padas* (metrical divisions). In Kālidāsa's three plays, this rule is not fully observed. Either in *Mālavikāgnimitram* or in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, it is difficult to assert that Kālidāsa's *Nandi ślokas* strictly follow the *pada* rule.

(d) Thematic Foreshadowing

Kālidāsa innovatively embeds thematic and narrative hints within the invocatory verses. In *Mālavikāgnimitram*, “ईश्वरः” points to Agnimitra as king and lover.

In *Vikramorvaśīyam*, “स्थानुः” conveys Vikrama's steadfast nature, while “योग” indicates the reunion of hero and heroine.

In *Śākuntalam*, “या सृष्टिः” signals Śākuntalā as heroine, while “सर्वबीजप्रकृति” anticipates the birth of Bharata.

(e) Poetic Excellence

Unlike purely ritual invocations, Kālidāsa's *Nandi* verses employ elaborate imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and aesthetic suggestion.

Thus, Kālidāsa harmonizes Bharata's ritual prescriptions with poetic innovation. His *Nandi* verses sanctify the stage, set the *rasa*, and orient the audience, while simultaneously functioning as artistic preludes.

The innovation lies in embedding thematic cues within ritual invocation, elevating the *Nandi* from ritual necessity to aesthetic brilliance.

Compared with other dramatists (e.g., Viśākhadatta's *Mudrārākṣasa*, Bhaṭṭanārāyaṇa's *Veṇīsamhāra*, Bhavabhūti's *Uttarā-Rāma-Carita*), Kālidāsa's practice shows greater emphasis on poetic artistry than strict adherence to metrical rules.

Prastāvanā in Kālidāsa's Dramas

Acharya Bharata, in the fifth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, under the section on *Pūrvavarga-vidhi*, describes the

Prastāvanā which introduces the play. According to him, after the recitation of the *Nandi* verse *Sūtradhāra* exits, another actor called the *Sthāpaka*, endowed with the same qualities as the *Sūtradhāra*, enters. He delights the audience with sweet verses and presents the *Prastāvanā*, which introduces the presents the subject of the play.

प्रयुज्य रङ्गान्निष्क्रमेत् सूत्रधारःसहानुगः ।

स्थापकः प्रशेत् तत्र सूत्रधारगुणाकृतिः॥

सुवाक्यमधुरैःश्लोकैर्नारसभावसमन्वितैः

प्रासाद्य रङ्गं विधिवत् कवेर्नामानुकीर्तयेत् ।

प्रस्तावना ततः कुर्यात् काव्यप्रख्यापनश्रयाम् ॥

विदूषकःसूत्रधारस्तथा वै पारिपार्श्विकः।

यत्र कुर्वन्ति सम्जल्पंतञ्चापि त्रिगतं मतम् ॥ ना.शा 5.28

उपक्षेपेणकाव्यस्यहेतुयुक्तिसमाश्रया।

सिद्धेनामन्त्रेण या तु विज्ञेया सा प्ररोचना॥

Apart from Fifth chapter, in the twenty-second chapter Bharata also discusses the *Prastāvanā* as a component of the *Bhārati Vṛtti*. Here he names it *Āmukha*. In this *Āmukha*, the *Sūtradhāra* converses in witty, speech with the *Naṭī*, the *Vidūṣaka*, or the *Pāripārśvika*.

नटीविदूषको वापि पारिपार्श्विक एव वा

सूत्रधारेणसहिताःसम्लापं यत्तु कुर्वते ।

चित्रवाक्यैः स्वकार्योत्थैः वीथ्यङ्गैरन्यथापि वा

आमुखं तत्तु विज्ञेयं बुधैः प्रस्तावनापि वा ॥

According to Bharata, the *Sthāpaka* should introduce the play after the *Nandi*. However, in Kālidāsa's dramas, the *Sūtradhāra* himself performs the function of introducing the play.

From the moment the *Sūtradhāra* appears on stage until his exit, it is considered the *Prastāvanā*, because here the *Sūtradhāra* engages in dialogue with the *Pāripārśvika* or the *Naṭī*. The *Prastāvanās* of Kālidāsa's dramas include witty dialogue, dramatic suggestion, audience orientation, and character introduction. They also employ dramatic devices such as *Prayogātīśaya* and *Vīthy-aṅgas*.

The *Prastāvanās* of Kālidāsa's dramas are discussed as follows:

Mālavikāgnimitram Sūtradhāra: From “अलमतिविस्तरेण” up to “सेवदक्षो परिजनोयम्” (verse 3) is the *Prastāvanā*.

According to Ācārya Bharata's analysis, this is the अवगलित type of *Prastāvanā*. Here the *Sūtradhāra*, following the command of learned assembly, introduces the entering of character with a verse beginning

“शिरसाप्रथमगृहीतामाज्ञामिच्छामि. परिषदःकर्तुम्।

देव्या इव धारिण्याः सेवदक्षो परिजनोयम्” M.A 1-3

Thus, with one section he both concludes the previous and begins the next. The *Prastāvanā* contains the famous critical verse by the *Sūtradhāra* replying co-actor, अयि, विवेक विश्रान्तमभिहितम् ! पश्य

पुराणमित्येव न साधु सर्वं न चापि काव्यं नवमित्यवद्यम् ।

सन्तः परोक्ष्यान्यतरदजन्ते मूढः परप्रत्ययनेयनुद्धिः

The verse reflects Kālidāsa's literary philosophy that neither antiquity nor novelty alone determines literary excellence.

Up to आर्यमिश्राः प्रमाणम् there is satire called अस्त्रलापम् a Viithyanga. According to Ācārya Bharata, when a learned man speaks well before a fool, it becomes Asatpralapam satire (Incoherent Chatter). Thus, the wise Sūtradhāra explains new poetry (drama of a new poet) to an unwise actor, but the actor refuses to accept it, saying आर्यमिश्राः प्रमाणम् (let audience accept)

Vikramorvaśīyam Sūtradhāra: From “अलमतिविस्तरेण” up to “क्रन्दत्यतः करुणमप्सरसां गणोज्यम्॥” (verse 1/4) is the Prastāvanā.

Thus, within this Prastāvanā, the Sūtradhāra accomplishes multiple functions. He recites the following verse

मत्तानां कुसुमरसेन षट्पदानां शब्दोज्यं परभुतनाद एष धीरः ।

आकाशे सुरगणसेविते समन्तात् किं नायः करुमधुराक्षरं प्रगीताः ॥३॥

In this section, because three sounds the sound of bees, cuckoo and the depressed ladies occur simultaneously, The Prastāvanā employs celestial sounds, bird imagery, and atmospheric suggestion to establish dramatic mood.

This is called the Trigata type of Vīthī. शृतिसाम्यादनेकार्थं योजनं त्विह। DR 3-16

Abhijñānaśākuntalam Sūtradhāra: From “1” up to “आर्ये ! यदि नेपथ्यविधानमवसितं इत आगम्यताम् ।” (verse 15) is the Prastāvanā. This too is of the Avalagīta type. Here also, through song of the Nati and the Sūtradhāra effectively introduce King Duśyanta's arrival being attracted by the hunt and establishes the emotional and aesthetic tone of the drama.

In this Prastāvanā there is no Vīthī. According to the definition of the Daśarūpaka-kāra Dhananjaya , the Prastāvanās of all three dramas are of the Prayogātīśaya type.

एषो यमित्युपक्षेपात्सूत्रधारप्रयोगतः ।

पात्रप्रवेशो यत्रैषप्रयोगातिशयो मतः । । दश ३-११

This study demonstrates that Kālidāsa's Nandi-prastāvanā in his dramas sanctifies the stage, sets the rasa, and orients the audience.

Correlation with Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra

The comparison between Bharata's prescriptions and Kālidāsa's adaptations reveals both continuity and innovation.

Sanctification of the Stage

Bharata says The Nandi must consecrate the performance space, ensuring auspiciousness and removal of obstacles (vighna). Whereas Kālidāsa invocations to Śiva sanctify the stage while simultaneously embedding cosmic imagery that enriches with poetic symbolism.

Invocation of Deities

Kālidāsa faithfully follows Bharata's insistence on divine invocation while selecting deities appropriate to the thematic structure of each play.

Establishment of Rasa

Bharata said The Nandi should establish the dominant Rasa. Kālidāsa cleverly aligns invocations with śṛṅgāra (love), hāsya (courtly delight), or divya-śṛṅgāra (divine romance), foreshadowing the emotional trajectory.

Audience Orientation

While Bharata emphasises that the Nandi should orient spectators toward the dramatic world, Kālidāsa enriches this function through vivid imagery of cosmic dance, divine protection, and celestial harmony, thereby immersing the audience in the universe of the play.

Integration of Ritual and Narrative

Bharata strictly says Ritual is functional, not ornamental. But Kālidāsa's invocations function not merely as ritual preliminaries but also as narrative, thematic preludes.

Poetic Expansion

Bharata insists on brevity and clarity. On contrary Kālidāsa transforms Bharata's ritual framework into a sophisticated literary device through imagery, symbolism, and suggestive language.

Respect for Tradition

Bharata establishes invocatory necessity. Kālidāsa respectfully retains ritual framework but enriches it with poetic innovation, demonstrating fidelity to tradition while exercising creativity.

Structural Placement within Prastāvanā

Bharata's Nandi is one type of Prastāvanā, alongside Udghātyaka and Prarocanā. Whereas Kālidāsa consistently begins with Nandi, situating it as both ritual invocation and structural prologue.

5.Implications and Modern Relevance

The comparative study of Bharata's prescriptions and Kālidāsa's adaptations of the Nandi-prastāvanā reveals important implications for understanding Sanskrit dramaturgy and its modern relevance. Bharata's emphasis on sanctification and audience orientation established ritual stability within theatrical performance, while Kālidāsa enriched the Nandi through poetic imagination, thematic resonance, and vivid imagery. Together, they demonstrate how Sanskrit theatre successfully balanced ritual necessity with aesthetic sophistication, offering valuable insights for contemporary performance theory and dramatic practice.

The study also opens possibilities for further comparative research with later dramatists such as Bhavabhūti and others to trace the historical evolution of the Nandi-prastāvanā. Such inquiry may reveal how successive playwrights negotiated the relationship between dramaturgical convention and poetic creativity across different literary periods.

Beyond dramaturgy, the Nandi carries pedagogical and cultural significance. It illustrates how beginnings in drama, ritual, and social practice possess symbolic and

psychological importance. Thus, the Nandi-prastāvanā emerges not merely as a ritual convention but as a timeless structural archetype, showing how innovation can flourish within tradition while sustaining cultural continuity and artistic expression.

The implications of this study affirm the enduring relevance of Sanskrit dramaturgy, while opening pathways for comparative and interdisciplinary research.

Conclusion

This study examined three primary objectives: analyzing Kālidāsa's poetic use of the Nandi prastāvanā, correlating his practice with Bharata's dramaturgical principles, and highlighting the thematic and aesthetic functions of the Nandi. The analysis demonstrated that Kālidāsa's Nandi ślokas serve not only as ritual invocations but also as artistic preludes that foreshadow the dramatic movement of the plays. His invocations to Śiva and Viṣṇu subtly anticipate central themes such as kingship, love, separation, reunion, and lineage in *Mālavikāgnimitram*, *Vikramorvaśīyam*, and *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*.

The comparative study further revealed a dynamic balance between continuity and innovation. Bharata prescribes the Nandi as a means of sanctifying the stage, invoking divine grace, and preparing the audience for rasa. Kālidāsa faithfully preserves these ritual foundations while enriching them through poetic imagery, symbolism, and thematic foreshadowing. In doing so, he transforms the Nandi from a formal convention into a structurally and aesthetically significant component of Sanskrit drama.

The study also established the modern relevance of the Nandi prastāvanā. Its principles of sanctification, mood setting, and audience orientation continue to resonate in contemporary theatre, cinematic openings, dance performance, concerts pedagogy, and cultural practices. Ultimately, the Nandi emerges not merely as a ritual necessity but as a timeless archetype of beginnings, demonstrating how creativity can flourish within tradition while preserving the enduring wisdom of Sanskrit dramaturgy.

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