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Performance and Musical System in Prahllad Nataka Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Prahllad Nataka is a devotional musico-dramatic tradition of southern Odisha that integrates ritual invocation, narrative dramaturgy, classical music, and folk performance practices into a unified theatrical structure. This paper examines the performance grammar, character system, spatial organization, musical architecture, and aesthetic principles that define the form. Beginning with the ritual Mangalacharana/Nandigana and guided by the Sutradhara, the performance unfolds through a carefully structured dramatic progression centered on the conflict between Hiranyakashipu and Prahllad, culminating in the climactic manifestation of Narasimha. The study analyzes the interplay between major and minor characters, the incorporation of comic and didactic interludes, and the integration of tribal and folk performance elements within a predominantly rāga-based musical framework. The repertoire employs thirty-four rāgas and six tālas, reflecting a confluence of Carnatic and Hindustani classical traditions within a regional devotional theatre context. The spatial configuration—featuring a tiered wooden stage and symbolic pillar—reinforces the ritual symbolism central to the narrative. Costume and make-up practices exhibit strong affinities with South Indian classical theatre traditions such as Kathakali and Therukoothu, while maintaining localized Odishan elements. The sacred Narasimha mask functions simultaneously as theatrical property and ritual icon. Despite reductions in performance duration due to modern socio-cultural shifts, Prahllad Nataka continues to preserve its devotional intensity and aesthetic integrity, representing a living synthesis of classical dramaturgical principles and community-based ritual theatre.

Keywords: *Musico-Dramatic Tradition, Narasimha Mask, Devotional Theatre Tradition, Nandigana, Mangalacharan, Sutradhara, Rasa.*

INTRODUCTION

Prahllad Nataka is a significant devotional theatre tradition of southern Odisha, particularly flourishing in the undivided Ganjam district. Rooted in the narrative of Prahllad and the incarnation of Lord Narasimha, the form represents a vibrant synthesis of ritual performance, classical music, stylized acting, and community participation. Over time, Prahllad Nataka has evolved as a distinctive regional theatre that integrates elements of South Indian folk and classical traditions while maintaining a strong foundation in Odishan cultural identity.

This article examines the performance structure, aesthetic principles, and dramaturgical framework of Prahllad Nataka through the theoretical lens of the Natyashastra. By analyzing its rasa progression, abhinaya techniques, musical architecture, and ritual staging, the study seeks to demonstrate how this living tradition embodies classical Indian theatrical theory within a localized devotional context. Through this exploration, the paper highlights Prahllad Nataka as both a ritual performance practice and a sophisticated dramaturgical system.

Performance Style of Prahllad Nataka

The performance of *Prahllad Nataka* traditionally begins with an invocation (Nandigana/Mangalacharana) dedicated to Lord Ganesh, Goddess Saraswati, and Lord Vishnu. This ritual opening seeks divine blessings for the successful completion of the performance. The Mangalacharana is generally composed and rendered in the style of Indian classical music, establishing a sacred and devotional atmosphere. The opening hymn typically praises Lord Ganesh as the remover of obstacles and invokes divine grace for artistic success. This ritualistic beginning reflects the deep interconnection between devotion and performance in traditional Odia folk theatre.

1. Role of the Sutradhara and Initial Entry

After the invocation, the Sutradhara (stage manager-narrator) introduces the theme and context of the play. This narrative device helps orient the audience and prepares them for the dramatic progression.

King Hiranyakashipu then makes a grand entrance, often accompanied by his queen Leelavati. His entry is visually elaborate and sometimes staged with royal symbols such as an elephant mount, highlighting his power and authority. Soon after, a messenger informs him of the death of his younger brother Hiranyaksha, who was killed by Lord Vishnu in the form of a boar (Varaha). Enraged Hiranyakashipu vows revenge and undertakes severe penance to obtain divine boons from Lord Brahma.

Lord Brahma grants him a complex boon: he cannot be killed by man or beast, inside or outside, during day or night, on earth or in the sky, or by any weapon. This dramatic background establishes the central conflict of the play.

2. Comic and Didactic Episodes

The childhood of Prahllad is portrayed with emotional depth and occasional comic interludes. Hiranyakashipu appoints Sukracharya and his disciples Chanda and Amarka to educate Prahllad and turn him away from devotion to Vishnu. These scenes are often presented in a semi-comic manner, incorporating mimicry, satire, and humorous dialogue to engage the audience. Despite repeated instructions, Prahllad refuses to abandon his devotion. Hiranyakashipu advises him using moral and political teachings, urging him to worship Lord Shiva, obey his teachers, respect tradition, and prepare for kingship. These advisory verses are performed in lyrical form, blending music and moral instruction.

3. Theatrical Representation of Punishment

When persuasion fails, Hiranyakashipu resorts to the classical political strategies of Sama (conciliation), Dana (gift), Danda (punishment), and Bheda (division). The punishment scenes form a major theatrical segment of *Prahllad Nataka*. Attempts to kill Prahllad—through elephants, fire, poison, swords, serpents, and other tortures—are dramatized with intense stage effects. These scenes combine devotional seriousness with folk entertainment. Various tribal and folk elements such as Sapua-Sapuni, Kela-Keluni, and Sabara-Sabaruni performances are incorporated. Folk songs, dances, and rhythmic movements enrich the dramatic texture and sustain audience engagement.

The punishment sequences evoke emotions of pity and fear, aligning with classical Indian aesthetic principles. At the same time, they demonstrate divine protection, reinforcing the moral theme that unwavering devotion triumphs over tyranny.

4. Climactic Court Scene and Appearance of Narasimha

The climax unfolds in the royal court. Hiranyakashipu challenges Prahllad, questioning the omnipresence of Lord Vishnu. When Prahllad affirms that Vishnu exists everywhere—even within a pillar—the enraged king strikes the pillar with his mace. At that dramatic moment, Lord Vishnu appears in the form of Narasimha (half-man, half-lion). The entry of Narasimha is one of the most powerful visual moments of the performance. With fierce gestures, roaring sounds, and energetic choreography, the confrontation scene creates intense dramatic impact. Narasimha ultimately kills Hiranyakashipu, fulfilling the conditions of Brahma's boon. The tyrant is slain at twilight, neither inside nor outside the palace, and without conventional weapons.

5. Concluding Devotional Resolution

After the death of Hiranyakashipu, Prahllad prays to calm the anger of Narasimha. The play concludes with the divine blessings and the coronation of Prahllad as king. The ending restores moral and cosmic order.

6. Aesthetic and Emotional Appeal

The entire performance of *Prahllad Nataka* integrates music, dance, dialogue, mimicry, and devotional singing. It balances humor with pathos, devotion with heroism, and fear with moral instruction. Audiences particularly anticipate:

- i. The fierce portrayal of Hiranyakashipu
- ii. The devotional steadfastness of Prahllad
- iii. The emotional suffering of Leelavati
- iv. The spectacular entrance of Narasimha
- v. The fearful fight of Narasimha and Hiranyakashipu

Through expressions of anger (Raudra), devotion (Bhakti), heroism (Veera), and compassion (Karuna), the performance creates a powerful emotional experience. The artistic presentation of Lord Vishnu in the form of Narasimha remains the most visually and spiritually compelling segment of the play.

Characters of *Prahllad Nataka*

Characters constitute one of the most significant structural components of *Prahllad Nataka*, alongside plot, dialogue, conflict, music, and scenic presentation. In accordance with the principles of Indian performance tradition, the dramatic progression of the play unfolds through structured stages of action, and this development is primarily sustained by its characters. The emotional intensity, thematic depth, and moral message of the play are effectively communicated through their interactions.

For analytical clarity, the characters of *Prahllad Nataka* may be classified into two broad categories:

1. Major Characters
2. Minor Characters

Major Characters

The major characters are those upon whom the central conflict and dramatic movement of the play depend. In *Prahllad Nataka*, the principal characters are:

- i. Hiranyakashipu
- ii. Prahllad
- iii. Leelavati
- iv. Narasimha

Hiranyakashipu

Hiranyakashipu is the central antagonist and the dramatic pivot of the play. His pride, tyranny, and opposition to Lord Vishnu generate the core conflict. His character embodies *Raudra Rasa* (the sentiment of anger) and political authority. The intensity of his performance, particularly in scenes of rage and confrontation, is crucial to the dramatic power of the play.

Prahllad

Prahllad represents unwavering devotion and spiritual steadfastness. As the protagonist, he embodies *Bhakti* (devotion), innocence, and moral courage. Despite facing extreme punishments, he remains calm and faithful. His character evokes *Karuna Rasa* (pathos) and serves as the moral centre of the narrative.

Leelavati

Leelavati, the queen and mother of Prahllad, adds emotional depth to the performance. She stands between maternal affection and wifely loyalty. Her character intensifies the tragic and compassionate dimensions of the play.

Narasimha

Narasimha, the divine incarnation of Lord Vishnu, appears in the climactic scene. His dramatic entry marks the resolution of the conflict. The portrayal of Narasimha combines *Raudra* (fury) and *Veera Rasa* (heroism), providing a visually and emotionally powerful conclusion.

The dramatic progression of *Prahlad Nataka* is fundamentally dependent on the interaction and conflict among these four major characters.

Minor Characters

Minor characters support the development of the main plot and assist in achieving the dramatic objectives of the play. Though secondary in narrative importance, they enrich the performance through humor, commentary, ritual significance, and emotional layering.

The important minor characters include: Bighneswara, Gahaka, Sutradhara, Mantri (Minister), Duari (Gatekeeper), Betrahasta, Sukracharya, Chanda and Marka, Chara (Spy), Indra, Narada, Dhai (Nurse), Dasi (Maid), Mahunta, Daityabira, Bhu-Devi, Kapati Daitya, Malla, Sapua and Sapuani, Bishadayaka, Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar, Mahalaxmi

These characters contribute to various dimensions of the performance, including ritualistic invocations, comic relief, narrative transitions, moral instruction, and folk entertainment. For instance, the Sutradhara guides the audience through the narrative framework, while characters like Sapua-Sapuani and other folk figures introduce indigenous cultural elements into the performance.

The interaction between major and minor characters creates a balanced dramatic structure. While the major characters sustain the central conflict between devotion and tyranny, the minor characters enhance theatrical richness through music, dance, satire, and ritual elements. Together, they transform *Prahlad Nataka* into a dynamic synthesis of devotion, folk aesthetics, and classical dramatic principles.

Performance Space

Prahlad Nataka was traditionally performed in the middle street of the village or in the courtyard of a temple. The performance required a very simple acting space. Generally, a wooden stage consisting of five stepped tiers, approximately eight feet in height and eight feet in width, was constructed for the performance. At the center of the topmost step, a wooden chair was placed to symbolize the royal throne of King Hiranyakashipu.

The orchestra was arranged either on the right or left front side of the ground-level stage. On the opposite front side, an artificial pillar was erected using bamboo pieces and newly folded cotton dhotis. This pillar played a crucial role in staging the climactic scene depicting the battle between Lord Narasimha and Hiranyakashipu. It also symbolized the divine pillar from which the omnipresent Lord Vishnu manifested at the end of the play.

This spatial arrangement has been consistently followed from the inception of *Prahlad Nataka* to the present day, without any major structural modifications. Since the performance traditionally takes place at night, the stage was illuminated in earlier times with Petromax lamps, kerosene lamps, or fire torches. With the advent of electricity, high-powered electric halogen bulbs are now commonly used for lighting the performance space.

Prahlad Nataka is fundamentally a music- and dance-dominated form of folk theatre. Its structure, performance grammar, and aesthetic appeal are deeply rooted in musical expression. Historically, the tradition is believed to have originated from Jalantar, a feudal kingdom of Andhra Pradesh during the medieval period. Consequently, a strong influence of South Indian musical tradition is distinctly visible in its melodic framework, rhythmic patterns, and instrumental accompaniment.

The musical architecture of *Prahlad Nataka* is highly systematic and rich in variety. The text generally incorporates forty-two Sanskrit *ślokas*, eleven Odia songs, and one hundred twenty-six lyrical compositions structured under thirty-four *rāgas* and six *tālas*. This intricate musical organization demonstrates that the performance is not merely dramatic narration but a carefully codified musical-theatrical synthesis.

Rāgas Used in *Prahlad Nataka*

The repertoire includes thirty-four *rāgas* such as Bhairavi, Kalyani, Saveri, Khamaj, Jhinjhoti, Puri, Marua, Sankarabharana, Sahana, Punnaga Marua, Nata, Pantabarali, Hindusthani Todi, Sindhu Khamaj, Arabhi, Jamuna Kalyani, Bihag, Kedar Gauda, Ashavari, Mukhari, Desh, and Desiya Todi, among others.

The presence of *rāgas* like Kalyani, Sankarabharana, Saveri, Arabhi, and Pantabarali clearly indicates the influence of the Carnatic system of South Indian classical music, while *rāgas* such as Bihag, Desh, and Hindusthani Todi reveal an interaction with the Hindustani tradition. This confluence reflects the dynamic cultural exchange between regional devotional theatre and classical music systems.

Tālas Used in *Prahlad Nataka*

Six principal *tālas* are employed in the performance tradition:

- i. Atha Tala
- ii. Eka Tala
- iii. Adi Tala
- iv. Rupaka Tala
- v. Jhula Tala
- vi. Atta Tala

The rhythmic framework provided by these *tālas* governs not only the musical compositions but also choreographed movements, stylized gestures, and dramatic tempo. The dominance of Adi Tala and Rupaka Tala again points toward the southern rhythmic influence embedded within the form.

Musical Instruments

The instrumental ensemble traditionally includes:

- i. Dakhini Mardala (South Indian drum)
- ii. Cymbals (Karatal)
- iii. Manjira

- iv. Turi
- v. Mahuri
- vi. Ramtali / Jhumuka
- vii. Harmonium

The Dakhini Mardala plays a central rhythmic role, maintaining tempo and dramatic intensity. Wind instruments like the Mahuri and Turi enhance ceremonial and martial scenes, especially during climactic sequences such as the appearance of Narasimha. Cymbals and Manjira reinforce devotional fervor and collective participation. In addition to the structured classical compositions, certain minor characters—such as Sapua, Sapuani, Chand Marka, Sukracharya, and Bishadayaka—occasionally incorporate folk singing styles into the performance. This blending of classical rāga-based music with localized folk idioms enriches the performative texture and strengthens audience engagement.

Aesthetic Significance

The predominance of music and dance in *Prahlad Nataka* aligns with the principles articulated in the *Natyashastra*, where *gīta* (song), *vādyā* (instrumental music), and *nṛtta* (dance) are considered essential components of theatrical expression. In this sense, *Prahlad Nataka* embodies a living synthesis of classical dramaturgical theory and regional devotional practice. Thus, the form may be understood not simply as a folk drama but as a musico-dramatic tradition in which rāga, tāla, gesture, and narrative operate in harmonious integration to produce aesthetic experience and devotional ecstasy.

Costume and Make-up of Prahlad Nataka

Costume and make-up in *Prahlad Nataka* constitute an essential visual dimension of its performance grammar. Broadly, two types of costume design are observed in this theatrical tradition. The principal characters follow a highly stylized and elaborate costume pattern influenced by South Indian theatrical traditions, whereas the minor characters adopt comparatively simpler, localized designs.

The costume, make-up, and ornaments of major characters such as Hiranyakashipu, Leelavati, and Prahlad exhibit striking similarities with classical performance traditions like Kathakali, Koodiyattam, and Therukoothu. The facial make-up is highly expressive, marked by bold color contrasts, exaggerated eye designs, and symbolic facial patterns that denote moral and psychological traits. Royal and divine characters wear heavy crowns, layered garments, elaborate chest ornaments, armlets, and waistbands, emphasizing grandeur and heroic stature.

In contrast, minor characters such as Sukracharya, Chandamarka, Sapua, and Sapuani follow a more localized costume style reflecting regional folk aesthetics. Their make-up is less elaborate, and their attire corresponds more closely to rural Odishan traditions. This duality in costume design reflects a synthesis of classical South Indian theatrical influence and indigenous Odishan folk culture.

A particularly significant element of the costume tradition is the heavy mask used to portray Narasimha. This mask is not merely a theatrical prop but a sacred object imbued with ritual significance. It is not commercially produced or treated as decorative merchandise; rather, it is revered as a divine embodiment. Before each performance, the mask is ritually worshipped in the green room. Throughout the year, it is preserved and worshipped in the village temple dedicated to Lord Narasimha, Radha-Krishna, Gopinatha, or Jagannatha. The actors and members of the troupe accord it profound respect, maintaining ritual purity in its handling. Thus, the mask functions simultaneously as a performative device and a sacred icon, reinforcing the devotional character of the theatre. From a theoretical perspective, such stylized costume and make-up correspond to the concept of *Natyadharmi* described in the *Natyashastra*, where exaggerated visual codes are employed to communicate character types and emotional states symbolically rather than realistically.

Performance Duration of Prahlad Nataka

Traditionally, *Prahlad Nataka* was performed over seven consecutive nights. Over time, this duration was reduced to three nights and eventually to a single night due to changing audience preferences and the impact of modernity. Contemporary performances usually last from evening until dawn, extending approximately twelve to fifteen hours.

Structure of the Seven-Night Performance

When performed over seven nights, the narrative was divided into the following segments:

- i. The penance of Hiranyakashipu
- ii. The birth of Prahlad
- iii. The education and upbringing of Prahlad
- iv. The punishment of Prahlad through Gaja Karnabira and the wild elephant
- v. His attempted execution by being thrown from a mountain, offered to Bhudevi, and confined in a cave
- vi. Tortures by fire, abandonment among snakes, and imprisonment
- vii. The slaying of Hiranyakashipu

Structure of the Three-Night Performance

In the three-night format, the episodes were arranged as follows:

- i. **First Night:** From the invocation to Ganesha to the birth of Prahlad.
- ii. **Second Night:** From Prahlad's traditional education under his guru to the sacrificial offering to Chandi.
- iii. **Third Night:** From the threats issued by the demons under the king's command to the climactic killing of Hiranyakashipu by Narasimha.

The reduction in duration reflects the transformation of ritual theatre in response to socio-cultural change. While the narrative compression has altered the temporal structure, the core devotional and dramatic essence of *Prahlad Nataka* remains intact. The overnight performance format continues to preserve its ritualistic intensity, maintaining the immersive aesthetic experience central to traditional Indian theatre.

CONCLUSION

Prahlad Nataka represents a rare and resilient synthesis of devotion, dramaturgy, music, ritual, and community performance within the cultural landscape of southern Odisha. From its contested literary origins and royal patronage to its sustained transmission through guru lineages, the tradition has evolved without losing its structural integrity or devotional core.

The multiplicity of its denominations reflects the layered semantic framework through which the form is received—devotional, political, theological, and performative dimensions coexisting within a unified theatrical expression.

The performance grammar of Prahllad Nataka demonstrates a dynamic integration of classical and folk elements. Its structured invocation, the narrative role of the Sutradhara, the systematic use of rāga and tāla, and the stylized abhinaya techniques align closely with the dramaturgical principles of the *Natyashastra*. At the same time, the incorporation of tribal motifs, folk interludes, and localized performance idioms grounds the tradition within its regional socio-cultural ecology. This coexistence of *Natyadharmi* stylization and *Lokadharmi* spontaneity underscores its hybrid aesthetic character.

The spatial arrangement, musical architecture, elaborate costume conventions, and especially the sacred Narasimha mask collectively reinforce the ritualistic intensity of the form. Even the transformation of performance duration—from seven nights to a single overnight presentation—illustrates adaptation rather than decline. The narrative compression has not diminished its emotional force; instead, it reflects the tradition's responsiveness to changing socio-cultural contexts.

Ultimately, Prahllad Nataka is not merely a mythological enactment of the Prahllad narrative but a living cultural archive that preserves ethical values, devotional philosophy, musical knowledge, and collective memory. Its continued vitality affirms the enduring power of Bhakti as both aesthetic experience and social ethos. In this sense, Prahllad Nataka stands as a sophisticated musico-dramatic system in which ritual devotion and theatrical artistry converge to produce profound aesthetic and spiritual resonance.

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