

REINTERPRETING MĀNUṢĪ SIDDHI THROUGH AUDIENCE PREPAREDNESS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BHARATA'S NĀṬYAŚĀSTRA AND SAMARTH RAMDAS' ŚROTĀ-AVALAKṢAṆA NIRŪPAṆA

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Abstract

Classical Indian performance theory has traditionally evaluated the success of theatrical presentation through Bharata's concept of Mānuṣī Siddhi, wherein audience response serves as the visible manifestation of successful aesthetic communication. While this concept has received scholarly attention within discussions of Rasa and Abhinaya, relatively little emphasis has been placed on the conditions that enable such audience response. This paper reinterprets Mānuṣī Siddhi through a comparative study of Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and Samarth Ramdas' Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa in the Dāsboḍh. It argues that Ramdas' analysis of listener behaviour provides an important interpretative framework for understanding the behavioural and psychological dimensions underlying successful performance. Using qualitative comparative textual analysis supported by observations from contemporary Kirtan and Kathak traditions, the study demonstrates that artistic accomplishment alone cannot ensure performative success; it also depends upon the preparedness of the audience to receive, interpret and respond to artistic communication. Rather than proposing a historical relationship between these texts, the paper places them in conceptual dialogue and suggests that audience preparedness constitutes an underexplored interpretative dimension of Mānuṣī Siddhi. This perspective contributes to Indian Performance Studies by expanding the understanding of performer–audience interaction within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems.

Keywords: Mānuṣī Siddhi, Nāṭyaśāstra, Samarth Ramdas, Dāsboḍh, Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa, Audience Preparedness, Kirtan, Kathak, Indian Performance Studies.

1. Introduction:

Performance is fundamentally an act of communication in which meaning is created through the interaction between performer and audience. Across theatrical, musical and narrative traditions, the quality of a presentation is often evaluated through the performer's artistic competence. Classical Indian aesthetics, however, proposes a broader understanding by recognising that artistic excellence achieves its purpose only when it evokes an appropriate response in the spectator. This reciprocal relationship forms one of the central principles of Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra, where the success of performance is articulated through the concept of Mānuṣī Siddhi (Bharata 278–81).

The Nāṭyaśāstra identifies audience appreciation as evidence that the intended aesthetic experience has been successfully communicated. Applause, emotional engagement and attentive reception are treated not merely as social reactions but as indicators that Rasa has been effectively realised. Thus, the audience occupies an essential position within Bharata's theory of performance.

Modern scholarship has extensively examined Bharata's theories of Rasa, Bhāva, Abhinaya and dramaturgy. Nevertheless, discussions of Mānuṣī Siddhi have generally remained confined to its role as the outcome of successful performance. Comparatively little attention has been directed towards an equally important question: What enables an audience to respond in a manner that leads to Mānuṣī Siddhi?

A compelling perspective on this question emerges from Samarth Ramdas' Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa, a chapter in the Dāsboḍh devoted to the characteristics of listeners. Although primarily situated within a devotional context, the chapter contains detailed observations on attentiveness, receptivity and the behavioural conditions necessary for effective communication. Rather than merely prescribing ethical conduct, Ramdas presents a practical understanding of audience behaviour grounded in lived experience as a spiritual teacher and public speaker.

This paper argues that these two texts should be read as complementary rather than isolated traditions. Bharata explains how successful performance is recognised through Mānuṣī Siddhi, whereas Ramdas explains the qualities that enable listeners to participate meaningfully in that success. Bringing these perspectives into dialogue offers a more comprehensive understanding of performer–audience communication and highlights the continuing relevance of Indian aesthetic thought to contemporary performance traditions such as Kirtan and Kathak.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

The Nāṭyaśāstra has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry and continues to serve as the principal source for understanding Indian aesthetics and performance theory. Adya Rangacharya's English translation and commentary made Bharata's dramaturgical principles more accessible to modern scholars, emphasising the integrated relationship between dramatic structure, performance practice and audience reception (Rangacharya 212–15). Kapila Vatsyayan further interpreted the Nāṭyaśāstra as a comprehensive framework for Indian performing arts, highlighting the interdependence of movement, music, literature and aesthetic experience (Vatsyayan 34–38). Similarly, Puru Dadhich has examined Bharata's theatrical concepts from the perspective of Sanskrit dramaturgy, demonstrating the continuing relevance of classical performance principles within contemporary Indian artistic traditions (Dadhich 145–52).

Although these scholars acknowledge the importance of Mānuṣī Siddhi, their discussions primarily treat it as the successful culmination of performance through audience appreciation. The behavioural and psychological conditions that enable such appreciation have received comparatively little independent attention.

The role of the spectator has also been examined within broader performance theory. Richard Schechner views performance as an interactive event in which meaning is generated through the relationship between performer and audience rather than through artistic presentation alone (Schechner 28–34). Victor Turner similarly argues that performance creates a participatory space where social and emotional experience is collectively negotiated (Turner 11–19). While these perspectives enrich the understanding of audience participation, they emerge from different theoretical contexts and do not engage directly with Bharata's concept of Mānuṣī Siddhi.

Within studies of Maharashtra Kirtan, Ashok D. Ranade has explored the communicative and musical dimensions of Indian oral traditions, demonstrating how performance functions simultaneously as artistic expression and cultural transmission (Ranade 198–205). Research by Rohini Pawar has identified significant performative parallels between Kirtan and Kathak, particularly in relation to abhinaya and narrative presentation. Likewise, Shubhada Bhosale has examined these traditions from ritual and stage-performance perspectives, emphasising their shared performative vocabulary. These studies strengthen the understanding of devotional performance but devote limited attention to audience behaviour as an independent analytical category.

Scholarship on Samarth Ramdas has largely focused on his philosophy, ethics, devotional teachings and socio-political thought. Consequently, Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa has generally been interpreted as moral guidance for spiritual seekers rather than as a systematic reflection on audience behaviour and communication within live performance.

The review therefore reveals two significant gaps. First, Mānuṣī Siddhi has seldom been interpreted through the lens of audience preparedness. Second, Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and Ramdas' Dāsbodh have rarely been examined within a common performative framework. Addressing these gaps, the present study proposes that Ramdas' observations on attentive listening provide an important interpretative perspective for understanding the behavioural conditions underlying Mānuṣī Siddhi. Rather than suggesting a historical relationship between the two texts, the paper establishes a conceptual dialogue that contributes to Indian Performance Studies and Indian Knowledge Systems.

3. Research Design and Methodology:

The present study adopts a qualitative, comparative and interpretative research methodology to examine the relationship between Bharata's concept of Mānuṣī Siddhi and Samarth Ramdas' Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa. Although the two texts belong to different historical periods and literary traditions, both engage with the relationship between performer and audience and therefore provide a meaningful basis for comparative analysis. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- 3.1. How is Mānuṣī Siddhi conceptualised in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra with particular reference to audience response?
- 3.2. What understanding of listener behaviour emerges from Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa?
- 3.3. Can Ramdas' observations be interpreted as behavioural conditions that facilitate the realization of Mānuṣī Siddhi?
- 3.4. How do these two texts complement one another in explaining performer–audience communication within Indian performance traditions?

To address these questions, the study pursues three objectives: first, to analyse Bharata's formulation of Mānuṣī Siddhi; second, to examine Ramdas' discussion of attentive listening and audience behaviour; and third, to develop a comparative interpretation that positions audience preparedness as an important dimension of performative success.

The research is based primarily on comparative textual analysis of Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and Samarth Ramdas' Dāsbodh (Daśaka 18, Samāsa 10: Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa). Interpretations are further supported by observations from contemporary practices of Naradiya Kirtan and Kathak. The study remains interpretative rather than empirical and does not seek to establish direct historical influence between the two texts. Instead, it investigates how they may be read together to enrich contemporary understanding of performer–audience communication.

4. Mānuṣī Siddhi in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra:

Among Bharata's many contributions to Indian aesthetic theory, the concept of Siddhi occupies a significant position in evaluating the success of dramatic performance. The Nāṭyaśāstra does not measure success solely by the performer's technical accomplishment or mastery of dramatic conventions. Instead, it recognises performance as a complete aesthetic event whose fulfilment depends upon its reception by the audience. Within this framework, Bharata classifies Siddhi into two categories: Daivī Siddhi (divine accomplishment) and Mānuṣī Siddhi (human accomplishment), the latter being realised through the appreciative response of spectators (Bharata 278–81).

Unlike technical perfection, *Mānuṣī Siddhi* is not an attribute possessed exclusively by the performer. It becomes evident through the audience's reactions to the performance. Bharata describes expressions such as attentive observation, emotional involvement, admiration, applause and spontaneous appreciation as signs that the dramatic presentation has successfully communicated its intended aesthetic experience. These responses signify that the audience has not merely witnessed the performance but has participated in its aesthetic realization.

This understanding reflects the broader philosophy of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in which performance is conceived as a shared experience between performer and spectator. Bharata's theory of *Rasa* similarly depends upon this reciprocal relationship. The performer's presentation of *Bhāvas* attains artistic fulfilment only when transformed into aesthetic experience within the consciousness of receptive spectators. Consequently, *Mānuṣī Siddhi* should be understood as the observable manifestation of successful *Rasa*-realisation rather than simply an indication of technical excellence.

An important implication of Bharata's discussion is that audience response serves as a criterion for evaluating performance. The value of a theatrical presentation is therefore determined not merely by the performer's intention or skill but by the extent to which aesthetic communication is realised in the audience. In this sense, *Mānuṣī Siddhi* represents a sophisticated recognition that artistic success cannot be separated from audience reception.

While Bharata clearly identifies the signs through which successful performance may be recognised, his discussion gives comparatively less attention to the behavioural qualities that enable spectators to respond in this manner. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* acknowledges the importance of the audience but does not systematically analyse the attitudes, discipline or preparedness that facilitate effective aesthetic reception. Rather than indicating a deficiency in Bharata's theory, this observation points towards an interpretative dimension that may be further illuminated through dialogue with later Indian intellectual traditions.

Accordingly, the present study proposes that *Mānuṣī Siddhi* should be understood not merely as the conclusion of successful performance but also as the outcome of an effective communicative relationship between performer and audience. This perspective naturally leads to a further inquiry: What qualities enable an audience to become an active participant in aesthetic realization? A significant response to this question emerges in Samarth Ramdas' *Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa*, where the focus shifts from recognising successful performance to preparing the listener for meaningful participation.

5. Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa: Audience Preparedness as the Foundation of Performative Success:

Samarth Ramdas' *Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa*, found in the *Dāsboḍh* (*Daśaka* 18, *Samāsa* 10), is traditionally understood as a discourse on the qualities of an ideal listener. Most interpretations approach the chapter within the context of spiritual instruction, emphasising humility, devotion and ethical conduct. However, when examined from the perspective of performance studies, the text reveals a broader and remarkably practical concern: the preparation of the audience for meaningful communication.

Unlike Bharata, whose discussion centres on recognising the successful outcome of performance, Ramdas directs attention to the behavioural conditions that influence the listener's capacity to receive knowledge. Throughout the chapter, he identifies habits that obstruct communication, including inattentiveness, unnecessary conversation, restlessness, prejudice, pride, superficial listening and mental distraction. In contrast, he values attentive listening, patience, humility, discrimination, curiosity and sustained concentration as essential qualities of an ideal listener (Ramdas, *Dāsboḍh* 18.10).

These observations should not be understood merely as ethical prescriptions. Rather, they reflect Ramdas' practical understanding of communication developed through decades of public discourse and *Kīrtan*. His concern extends beyond what is spoken to include how it is received. The effectiveness of communication,

therefore, depends not solely upon the competence of the speaker but equally upon the preparedness of the listener.

This perspective invites a further question: Why does Samarth Ramdas devote an entire chapter to describing listeners? The answer lies in the nature of oral performance itself. Every performative tradition that relies upon spoken word, music or narration presupposes an active listener. Knowledge cannot be transmitted if attention is fragmented, nor can emotional experience be shared if the audience remains psychologically disengaged. Ramdas therefore recognises that communication is a reciprocal process requiring responsibility from both the speaker and the listener.

A closer reading suggests that Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa addresses two audiences simultaneously. On one level, it instructs listeners by encouraging attentive, disciplined and reflective participation. On another level, it offers performers a practical understanding of audience behaviour. By identifying the causes of distraction and receptivity, Ramdas implicitly teaches speakers, Kirtankars and performers to recognise the psychological state of their audience and to adapt their presentation accordingly. In this sense, the chapter functions not only as guidance for listeners but also as an indigenous manual of audience psychology.

This interpretation significantly expands the performative relevance of the Dāsboḍh. Rather than limiting the chapter to devotional instruction, it may be understood as a systematic reflection on the human conditions necessary for successful communication. Its observations remain applicable to contemporary performance contexts in which maintaining audience engagement continues to be one of the performer's greatest challenges. When viewed alongside Bharata's Mānuṣī Siddhi, Ramdas' discussion acquires further significance. Bharata explains that audience response confirms the success of performance, whereas Ramdas explains the qualities that enable such a response to emerge. The two texts therefore address different stages of the same communicative process. One identifies the evidence of performative success; the other examines the human conditions that make that success possible.

The present study does not suggest that Ramdas intended to interpret Bharata, nor does it claim a historical continuity between the Nāṭyaśāstra and the Dāsboḍh. Instead, it proposes that reading these texts together offers a richer understanding of performer–audience communication. This comparative reading suggests that audience preparedness may be understood as an underexplored interpretative dimension of Mānuṣī Siddhi, thereby extending its relevance from aesthetic response to the broader process of performer–audience communication.

6. Comparative Analysis: Towards an Audience-Centred Interpretation of Mānuṣī Siddhi

Although Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra and Samarth Ramdas' Dāsboḍh emerge from distinct historical, literary and philosophical traditions, both recognise that performance achieves its purpose only through meaningful interaction between performer and audience. Their perspectives, however, address different dimensions of this interaction. Bharata explains how successful performance is recognised, whereas Ramdas examines the behavioural conditions that make such success possible. Read together, these texts offer a more comprehensive understanding of performative communication than either provides independently.

The comparison reveals that Mānuṣī Siddhi should not be understood merely as a spontaneous response to artistic excellence. Bharata identifies audience appreciation as the visible manifestation of successful performance, yet the process through which spectators become capable of such appreciation remains largely implicit. Ramdas' discussion of attentive listening, discipline, humility and receptivity provides an interpretative framework for understanding this missing dimension. His observations suggest that audience response is not accidental but emerges from conscious participation in the performative event.

This comparative perspective also expands the conventional understanding of performative success. Artistic competence, however refined, does not by itself guarantee meaningful communication. A technically accomplished performance may fail to achieve its intended effect if the audience remains inattentive or

emotionally detached. Conversely, an attentive and receptive audience actively contributes to the realization of aesthetic experience. The success of performance, therefore, should be understood as a shared accomplishment arising from the reciprocal engagement of performer and spectator.

Importantly, the present interpretation does not propose a direct historical relationship between Bharata and Samarth Ramdas. Nor does it suggest that Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa was conceived as a commentary on the Nāṭyaśāstra. Instead, the comparison is conceptual. By placing these texts in dialogue, the study demonstrates how Ramdas' reflections on audience behaviour illuminate an aspect of Mānuṣī Siddhi that has received comparatively little attention in existing scholarship.

This dialogue contributes to Indian Performance Studies in two ways. First, it broadens the interpretation of Mānuṣī Siddhi beyond audience response to include the human conditions necessary for aesthetic realization. Second, it highlights the continuing relevance of classical Indian texts for understanding contemporary performer–audience relationships. Rather than viewing these works as isolated historical documents, the comparison demonstrates their capacity to generate new theoretical insights when read together.

Comparative Overview

Dimension	Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra	Samarth Ramdas' Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa
Primary Concern	Realisation of <i>Mānuṣī Siddhi</i> through audience response	Preparation of listeners for meaningful participation
Central Focus	Aesthetic fulfilment	Behavioural and psychological readiness
Role of Audience	Audience response validates performance	Audience preparedness enables effective reception
Performer–Audience Relationship	Performance evaluated through audience appreciation	Communication strengthened through disciplined listening
Nature of Success	Outcome-oriented	Process-oriented
Contribution to Performance Theory	Defines performative success	Explains conditions leading to performative success

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that successful performance cannot be attributed exclusively to either the performer or the audience. It emerges through a dynamic process in which artistic expression and audience preparedness work together to realise aesthetic communication. From this standpoint, audience preparedness may be understood as an underexplored interpretative dimension of Mānuṣī Siddhi and as a meaningful contribution to contemporary discussions in Indian Performance Studies.

The comparative analysis suggests that performative success may be understood through three interrelated stages: (1) artistic presentation by the performer, (2) audience preparedness characterised by attentiveness, receptivity and disciplined participation, and (3) audience response culminating in the realization of Mānuṣī Siddhi*. This framework does not replace Bharata's theory but expands its interpretative possibilities by integrating behavioural insights drawn from Samarth Ramdas' Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa.

7. Contemporary Relevance and Implications

The audience-centred interpretation proposed in this study extends beyond textual analysis and offers meaningful insights for contemporary Indian performance traditions. Live performing arts such as Kirtan and Kathak continue to depend upon a dynamic relationship between performer and audience, where artistic

communication unfolds through shared experience rather than one-sided presentation. Consequently, evaluating performance exclusively through technical proficiency provides only a partial understanding of performative success.

In Kirtan, communication aims not only to transmit philosophical ideas but also to inspire reflection, emotional participation and collective engagement. Likewise, Kathak combines rhythm, movement, narrative and expressive interpretation to create aesthetic experience that is completed through audience reception. Although the artistic languages of these traditions differ, both rely upon attentive and receptive spectators for meaningful realization.

The comparative reading developed in this paper suggests that performer training may benefit from greater attention to audience psychology and communication alongside artistic technique. Equally, audience development initiatives, lecture-demonstrations and educational performances may cultivate more informed and engaged spectators, thereby strengthening the reciprocal relationship envisioned in both the Nāṭyaśāstra and the Dāsboḍh. Such an approach recognises that the quality of performance is shaped not only by artistic preparation but also by the conditions of reception.

Beyond Kirtan and Kathak, this framework may contribute to broader discussions in theatre studies, performance pedagogy and Indian Knowledge Systems by encouraging renewed dialogue between classical theoretical texts and contemporary performance practice.

8. Conclusion

This study has reinterpreted Bharata's concept of Mānuṣī Siddhi through a comparative reading of Samarth Ramdas' Śrotā-Avalakṣaṇa Nirūpaṇa. While Bharata identifies audience response as the visible expression of successful performance, Ramdas provides a detailed understanding of the behavioural qualities that enable listeners to participate meaningfully in the communicative process. Read together, these texts reveal complementary dimensions of performer–audience interaction and broaden the understanding of performative success within Indian aesthetic thought.

Rather than proposing a historical relationship between the Nāṭyaśāstra and the Dāsboḍh, this paper has established a conceptual dialogue between them. Such a dialogue demonstrates that audience response should not be regarded merely as an outcome of artistic excellence but also as a process influenced by attentive listening, disciplined participation and psychological receptivity. From this perspective, audience preparedness may be understood as an underexplored interpretative dimension of Mānuṣī Siddhi.

The significance of this interpretation extends beyond the study of two classical texts. It highlights the continuing relevance of Indian intellectual traditions for contemporary performance studies and reinforces the value of interdisciplinary engagement within Indian Knowledge Systems. By bringing Bharata and Samarth Ramdas into conversation, the paper offers a framework that recognises successful performance as a shared achievement arising from the reciprocal participation of performer and audience.

Future research may build upon this framework through empirical studies of audience behaviour in Kirtan, Kathak and other Indian performance traditions, further enriching the dialogue between classical theory and contemporary practice.

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