

Abhinaya in Natyasastra

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In this session, I am going to concentrate on *Abhinaya* as explained by Bharata in *Natyasastra*. He has composed *Natyasastra* in an interlocutory method of discussion and the most important question he asks is *prayogaschaasyakeedrishyaha*- how is it performed? How is *Natya* performed? From text to performance; from text to stage? Bharata's intention in composing the *Natyasastra* text was it seems to answer this question specifically. And the answer is, 'through *Abhinaya*.' *Prayogaschaasyakeedrishyaha*? Thus *Natyasastra* becomes a *prayoga Shastra*. *Prayoga* in Sanskrit means performance. Therefore it is a manual of performance and *Abhinaya* is at the core of it. Bharata's statement of *Abhinaya* is exhaustive. He adopts several principles for its elaboration. First is a twofold classification as *Lokadharmi* and *Natyadharmi*. Bharata defines *Lokadharmi* as the natural behavior in ordinary life, everyday life. *Swabhavakarmoupagatha* – exhibiting the conventional practices of the world. *Lokadharmi* is thus a factual presentation as we see in realistic performances. *Natyadharmi*, on the other hand is the performance befitting the rules of dramaturgy. Movements are artificial, yet graceful and convincing. This is seen only on stage, not in real life. The representation of things like, for example, mountain-*Kailas*, vehicles such as *Radha*, and aerial flights- *Vimanam* etc. The presentation of all these on stage is *Natyadharmi*. It is done with choreographed footwork, along with stylized action and movement accompanied by percussive rhythm. An example is the journey of Dushyantha in a chariot, at the beginning of *Sakuntalam*.

In a realistic presentation, actors would have taken the pains to bring an artificial chariot on stage. But Bharata does not permit any such properties on stage. Let us take another example from Bhasa's *Abhisheka Natakam*, the third act which is called *Thorana Yudham*. It begins with the entry of a gardener named *Shankukarna*. Hanuman has destroyed the garden that was very dear to Ravana. The gardener is frightened to death as he sees the destruction of the garden by the mighty monkey. He runs to the palace of Ravana to inform him of this calamity; he reports to the gatekeeper Vijaya to inform the king quickly the atrocious action of destroying the *Asoka* garden by the monkey. "Vijaye nivedyatham nivedyatham maharajaya lankeshwaraya bhagrapraya ashokavanikethi"

This is the stylized and exaggerated mode of performance, with his legs shaking and stammering and broken words. It would have appeared clumsy if the gardener had informed this in the natural realistic way. The restless movements, stammering words, all show how frightened the poor man is. It has to be noted that he does not use regular Sanskrit pronunciation. The pronunciation here is artificial and has a peculiar tone. '*Ragayuktha vakyocharanam natyadharmi ithi*'. For spoken language or *Vachikaachika*, *Natyadharmi* is made by adding *raga* to the sentence. In other words, adding *raga* to the pronunciation makes it *Natyadharmi*.

Theatre that existed around the time of Bharata was realistic and crude. Bharata wanted a sophisticated theatre with stories of *Udatha nayaka* with an aim to create models for the entire society. He preferred stylized acting to realistic presentations. Bharata introduced the *Natyadharmi* mode of acting to distance his sophisticated

theatre from the crude realism of the plays performed in the open air and street corner. In poetics we have *swabhavokthi* and *vakrokthi*. Parallel to this in *Abhinaya*, we have *Natyadharmi* which is the stylized mode and *Lokadharmi* which is the stylized mode.

Now let us come to the *Abhinaya* proper. We have seen how the approach of Bharata is nonrealistic or *Natyadharmi*. *Abhinaya* literally means to bring forward or to lead towards- *abhi mugham nayathi*. *Abhinaya* brings out the emotion of the character on stage and leads it to the audience. Here we have to remember that the audience comprises of an assorted collection of individuals with varied dispositions; but the task of the actor is to get the entire audience to focus on the emotion of the character that he is playing/performing on stage. It is *Abhinaya* that brings the emotion of the character on stage and takes it to the audience. *Abhinaya* becomes the medium of communication, with which a communion with the spectators is made possible.

Let us go back to Sakuntala once again. Sakuntala and her friends are watering the plants in the first act of the play. They are in a jovial mood cracking jokes with one another. Dushyantha enters. Seeing a new handsome man Sakuntala experiences strange emotions. She is not used to such feelings. Thereafter she does not utter a single word. But her silence speaks. The poet beautifully describes this. "Her words do not mix with mine; but listens to whatever I say. She does not look straight in my eyes; but surely her eyes are fixed nowhere else." Here, the body movements and facial expressions of Sakuntala communicate to the audience that she has fallen in love with this young man. The *bhava* is communicated through *Abhinaya*.

Now we will move closer to the details of *Abhinaya* as described in *Natyasastra*. Bharata discusses the details of *Abhinaya* in three contexts in *Natyasastra*, in the chapters on *Rasa* and *Bhava*, the 6th and 7th chapters of *Natyasastra*. He gives instructions regarding each of the mental states and moods. He has enumerated 49 *bhavas* or mental states for every individual. From these 8 are the *Sthayi bhavas* or permanent states, 33 are *Sanchari bhavas* (Transient) and the remaining 8 are *Satvika bhavas* (emotional or facial expressions) These 49 *bhavas* or moods have to be expressed in the performance according to the context. Bharata gives minute details of presenting each of these *bhavas* using the mouth, the chin, eyes, eyebrows etc in the 6th and 7th chapters of *Natyasastra*. To give an example *Karuna* is presented by actions like crying aloud, losing consciousness, lamenting and weeping bitterly and also by physical torture and beating one's chest. '*saswararuthithayihi mohagamaischa paridevither vilapitheischa abhineyakarunaraso dehayasaabhihayaischa*' Similarly *Natyasastra* describes and details how each of the nine *Rasas* has to be presented by an actor.

Actually *Santa* is not accepted by the original version of *Natyasastra* because according to Bharata it could not be expressed in drama. So in the 49 moods (*Bhavas*) which Bharata elaborates in chapters 6 and 7, *Santa* is excluded.

From chapter six to thirteen, Bharata discusses various units of acting. In chapter 8 he gives the four types of acting- *Angika*, *Vachikaachika*, *Satvika* and *Aharya*. Chapter 9 talks about *Hastabhinaya*- acting with the gestures of the hands. The word *Mudra* that we use the way now was not prevalent during Bharata's time. He used the term *Hastabhinaya*. Chapter 10 talks about *Shareera Abhinaya-Abhinaya* with gestures of the limbs,

chest, sides (*parswa*), belly (*udarakarmani*), hip (*khadikarmani*), thighs (*urukarmani*) feet (*padakarmani*) etc. Chapter 11 is dedicated to the *Charivithanam* (the *Chari* movements) and Chapter 12 to the different *mandala* movements like *akasha mandala*, *bhoomandala* etc. Chapter 13 discusses different gaits (*gathiprachara*). The treatment of acting in these chapters are elaborate and exhaustive. Bharata converts the body to a language for communication. Every part, every limb and every inch of the body is considered to create a language to communicate. Bharata takes each part separately, break them into smaller units and create action. In the beginning, students are taught these different body movements in the *Kalari* in institutions like Kalamandalam.

Samanya Abhinaya

The second context is the 24th chapter where Bharata talks about *Samanya Abhinaya*. In the previous chapters we were discussing the mode of acting limb by limb, part by part, and unit by unit separately. But *samanya Abhinaya* is the process of *Samaaneekarana* or homogenizing, to bring about a totality, unity of the various units of acting, music, dance and percussion. The instructions here are meant for the director to create a harmony in the performance. The effect on stage is compared to that of a fire wheel or *Alathachakra*, a circle of fire, which is a stick with fire at one end. When it is rotated, slowly in the beginning and then quickly, it create an illusion of a complete circle of fire. This is similar to the 3 leaves of a fan that can be seen separately when the switch is off, but when it is on only a circle can be seen. The individual parts merge into a totality creating a harmony. This is *Samaaneekarana*. It is the responsibility of the director to add in all the different components of the play in such a way that there is a perfectly harmonious end product. In the earlier chapters acting was discussed in terms of distinct units. The process of *Samanya Abhinaya* is that of harmonious blending which helps the audience to enter a realm of transcendental bliss, the realization of *Rasa*.

We have the four kinds of acting- *Angika*, *Vachika*, *Satvika*, and *Aharya*. But here *Aharya* is the business of the *Chuttikkaran*/ the make-up artist. The actor is concerned with *Angika*, *Vachika* and *Satvika*. *Angika* deals with the physical action, using different parts of the body. For example, in *Padappurappadu*, in which the king goes for a war, the chariots and horses are equipped, and all preparations are made, etc. Acting the sequence of *Padappurappadu* is done in detail using the entire body and it would take up 35-40 minutes. With the accompaniment of percussion and with the use of gestures of the hands, movement of legs and footwork and with the use of facial muscles, the commencement, course and end of the king's journey on horseback is enacted.

The next is *Vachika*, the verbal acting with words. In Sanskrit dramas we use Sanskrit, and many other *Prakrut* languages as well; for characters like Shurpanakha *Heena Bhasha* (a low class language) is used.

Next comes *Satvika*, the most important form of acting envisaged by Bharata .Bharata goes to the extent of saying that '*sathve natyam prathishtitham*'. *Natya* is *Sathvam* itself; there is nothing beyond that. In *Satvika Abhinaya*, emotions come from the heart and we see it in the facial expressions. Thus all *Rasa Abhinaya* are generated with *Satvika Abhinaya*. Eyes are given a lot of importance in this act.

Now we are going to the third context where Bharata describes the further details of *Abhinaya* in chapter 26, which he calls *Chitra Abhinaya*, the *Abhinaya* as special representation. In dealing with different modes of representation certain special features have not been properly enunciated in the earlier chapters. In *Chitra Abhinaya*, specific instructions are given to actors regarding context specific acting. For example, one should lift up the head and look upwards employing different kinds of glances to show things like morning, sky, planets, stars and other objects in the sky; similarly the acting of the six seasons/ *Rithus* and the impact of each season, the actor has to communicate the effect of each climate on man. For example, *Varsha* (Rainy Season), extreme cold (*Himakara*), and the extreme heat of summer etc has to be enacted through *Chitra Abhinaya*. Sunrise, moon rise, different seasons etc. come in this chapter. The idea is to present visual pictures of all that is seen around, on stage. Now a days, in dance choreography also tries to show visual pictures on stage.

Even a tree can be presented on stage with *Chitra Abhinaya*, with its branches, leaves moving in the wind, fruits, birds perching on the branches, caterpillar crawling on the leaf etc. The interesting thing is that even when we are presenting inanimate objects, emotional associations are brought in. Think about an example like walking, which everyone is familiar with; but for an actor every walk is different. A leisurely walk of a beautiful lady in a garden is different from her walk when she is eagerly going to meet her lover who is waiting for her. Then she hears that her mother has seriously fallen ill and is in the death bed and she rushes to the hospital. All these involve walking associated different emotional content pitched at varying degrees. Every physical movement is for an artist is charged with emotions. This is called *prakarana Rasam* means the contextual *Rasa*

The sequence of Bharata's treatment of *Abhinaya* is interesting. First he tells about training the actor by training the body part by part as separate units (chapters 6-13). Then in the second phase- a total effect of the harmony, the *Samanya Abhinaya* (chapter 24), where the stress is on the realization of *Rasa*. Lastly *Chitra Abhinaya*, the instructions regarding enactment of special situations (chapter 26), which are not included in the other two sections. Here, the stress is on the *vibhavas* i.e., the creation of visual images. All the three put together gives a fair idea of Bharata's concept of actor-audience interaction.

I am concluding this discussion with Bharata's advice to the actors. "The world around, lessons from the *Shastra* and your own inner self are the only authorities above you. '*loko vidya loko vedasthadathyalmam pramanam privitham smritham*'. There are only three factors guiding the actor, the world around and what happens around, how people react etc. The second is *Vidya* including the principles of *Natyasastra*. The third is *Adhyatma*, the inner consciousness or inner self of the actor, which is the creative faculty without which there is no meaning in acting or presenting anything. These principles laid down are only certain instructions; the real success depends on how much inspiration one imbibes from outside world and how one applies it. One becomes a great actor, not just by studying *Natyasastra* alone, but by observing the world outside and getting inspired by it. An actor's work is a very imaginative one. The audience also has to be imaginative. That is a peculiar characteristic of classical theatre.

Interactive Segment

Divya Nedungadi: While executing *Vipralambha sringaram* and *Karuna* the *Cheshtas* are similar. How do we make the distinction while performing?

In *Kuttaneematha* written in 9th century, there is a description of presenting the first act of *Rathnavali Nataka*. After the presentation the artist is appreciated by the king specifically for making a clear distinction between *Vipralambha* and *Karuna*. Even though Bharata has described both of these, it is difficult to distinguish the two. Once I asked our great Mani Madhava Chakyar how these two were distinguished. He said that the *anubhavas* of both are the same. Bharata also describes it that way. He said that for *Karuna*, after acting out all the *anubhavas*, towards the end, there is despair at the corner of the eye. But when it is *Vipralambha*, there is a ray of hope in the corner of the eye. That means there will be a union, a hope for union. This is the difference between the two. This is what Manimadhava Chakyar said.

Joly Puthusseri. Can you explain the *Swabhavokthi* and *Vakrothi*?

In poetry, you say “five years have passed”. It is a factual statement and it is direct. When we say, “this garden has flowered five times”, what you mean is that five years have passed. This is another way of saying it, a kind of flowery language. Bharata has not compared this with *Swabhavokthi* or *Vakrothi*. It’s my own comparison. What I am trying to say is that *Lokadharmi* or *Swabhavokthi* is direct, like “five years have passed.” When you say “flowered five times”, it is similar to *Natyadharmi* or *Vakrothi*.

Priyadarshini: When we are enacting another person’s character with *Pakarnnattam*, will the *swabhav* be different? Will it fall under the *Chitra Abhinaya*? If I am enacting a male character, will it be natural? So where will that fall under?

Actually Bharata does not accept *Pakarnnattam*. *Natyasastra* does not have *Pakarnnattam*. In case there is a woman’s character, a woman should be there to enact it; a man cannot do that. This is Bharata’s stance. But in *Koodiyattam* have adopted *Pakarnnattam*, the transformation from one role to another. Here, the actor is given the freedom, he is in a position of neutrality. When he takes the role of Dushyantha, he moves to Dushyantha and becomes Dushyantha and his neutrality is lost. But *Koodiyattam* gives the actor the freedom to remain in neutrality and to move to a different person/ character. In *Koodiyattam* an actor who takes up the role of Dushyantha becomes the character, and then he comes back to his neutrality so that he can take the role of *Shakunthala*, if he wants to. This is the transfer of roles, a special technique of *Koodiyattam*. In dance also *Pakarnnattam* is possible. For instance, an actor dancing as Krishna can easily dance as Radha or any other Gopika. In theatre, it is not possible according to Bharata. This is the innovation of Kerala actors and *Koodiyattam*; in fact *Pakarnnattam* is one of the most important attractions of *Koodiyattam*.

Manvita Baradi: My question is about how is the audience prepared? Classical theatre has a specific vocabulary and grammar; I can understand it is way of life, but could you elaborate more on it?

In Bharata’s theatre, there is *Lokadharmi* and *Natyadharmi*. He expects both types of audience. For classical theatre an imaginative understanding is required from both the actor and the audience. What Abhinavagupta says is, when someone comes to the auditorium to see *Sakuntalam* or a play like that, he would

be in his own world at the beginning. When the main character comes in, the first impression he will have is “oh, this is so and so”, because he knows the actor. After a few minutes of the act, the audience will understand that this is Dushyantha. It is a kind of identification with the character. After some time, he sees Sakuntala and identifies her too. After a few more minutes, this identification emerges to the emotions presented. When there are three or four actors present on the stage at the same time, there will be a centralized emotion. Now, he identifies that emotion and this is the third stage. First, the audience identifies the actor, second the character and third, the central emotion.

Now, his emotions are personal. The emotions depicted are also related to either Dushyantha or to that of Shakunthala. The next process is where he is elevated from his personal self and he forgets that he is sitting in an auditorium, seeing a drama, and the fact that so and so is acting. He is elevated from his personal self and then a kind of *samanikarana* happens. The characters Dushyantha and Sakuntala are also raised to a higher level and then they are in a common level of emotions. That emotion is selfless and no one has personal interest in that emotion. This is known as *Samanikarana* or *Sadharanikarana* or *transpersonalisation*. It is only in this stage, you enjoy the play. There you have no personal interests; you never see a person on stage with any personal interests. You may have been attached to the actor during the initial stage, but when things go on as in the play, you are lifted and elevated to a higher plane. You are enjoying, in the midst of an emotional complex and that emotion does not have any personal interest to anybody. The *bhava*, the emotion, is towards the characters and to the audience; but at the end, the *Rasa*, the enjoyment, is for not only the audience, but also to the poet, and the actor. *Nayakasya kavehe srothuhu samanubhavaha*. Valmiki was grief-stricken when he said ‘*Maa Nishada*’, but he was not expressing his own grief. He is elevated to a universal level of pain, a universal sorrow. The actor who presents it has transformed to that character, and he does not have his personal feelings and emotions there. Same is the case with the audience too. Everyone gets elevated from their little worldly pleasures and sorrows.

With regard to classical theatre, there is another problem. Audience may not fully understand what is presented on the stage. The Kerala poet Kulasekhara has classified the audience into two levels. There is the *Preshakas*, who are the elite and the *Nanalokas* or the masses. All of them may not be in the same level of appreciation, but Bharata tells the actor that he has to please both the scholar and the illiterate. Everybody should have something to take.

Upendra Raghavendra: What is the contribution of Kerala theatre to the concept of acting to Sanskrit drama? One is *Pakarnnattam*. Are there other elements? The second question, what are the *Doshas* mentioned by Bharata for the actors?

Bharata was presenting an idealistic theatre with a *dheerodatha nayaka*, etc. He built his theatre concepts carefully by choosing a story, slowly developing it to an end. But Kerala theatre insisted that, it is not the story, not the acting, but the actor is important in a performance. Kulasekhara, a playwright from Kerala who wrote *Vyangyavyakhya*, said that when people came for a play like *Subhadradhananjayam* already know that Arjuna will marry Subhadra in the end and live happily. Then what is in it for them to see in this drama? It is not the

“what” of the play, but the “how” of the play. The way and mode of presentation is important. The actor is in the centre and his performance is important. He said that every actor, in his first appearance should give a detailed account of the character. He called it *Poorvasambhandha* or retrospection. Thus when Arjuna enters, he will say that he is *Madhyamapandava*, that he is living in the forest, and that he is in a problem and that is why he is on a pilgrimage, that he is going to meet *Subhadra* and Krishna at Dvaraka. The actor will explain the entire story that had happened already; but the interesting thing is that, there is no text by the author for this segment. The actor will use his own *manodharma*, his own imagination to reconstruct the story. He may take many days to enact this retrospection. That is the freedom of the actor.

In the four types of *Abhinayas*, there are only the *Angika* and *Satvika* to help him in this narration. He meets another character *Uloopi* and they interact; remember that there is only one actor on stage. *Pakarnnattam* or transformation of roles comes here. He enacts the role of *Uloobi*, in the same costume of that of *Arjuna*. Bharata won't allow this kind of a transformation of character from a particular role to another, that too without the change of the costume. These are two aspects of acting, the *Manodharma Abhinaya*, and transfer of roles are the contribution of Kerala Theatre. There is one more kind of acting; the *Vichara Abhinaya*. When *Dhananjaya* comes to the stage, he is reminded of old times. Why did I come to the forest? Should I marry *Subhadra*? If I marry *Subhadra*, what are the things I have to do? However these are not related to the story but are internal musings that reflect the internal conflict within the character. This is the third addition of Kerala theatre to Bharata's school of drama. Kerala theatre insists is that, the actor has to make a bond with the audience, illuminating himself and the character. Much importance is not given to the story and the author.

So, the contributions of Kerala theatre to Bharata's theatre are these innovations made by Kerala theatre are: 1) *Manodharma Abhinaya*. The actor can act according to his imagination. 2) Transfer of roles as in *Pakarnnattam*. 3) The actor can directly communicate with the audience through *Vichara Abhinaya*. 4) *Natya* has become more of an *attam* or dance, which has elasticity in its form and narrative. One day they will present only one *sloka* or only a part of it. There is no such thing as an entire story. This freedom given to the actor, is the most important aspect and contribution of Kerala theatre.

The Kerala Theatre was regularly performing the plays of Bhasa even when the texts were not 'available' and people were searching to find out the 'lost' plays. Kerala actors did perform *Bhasa's* plays, without knowing that they were written by Bhasa. They were not using the original text, but were using their own stage manual, which is prepared by a senior artist and is taught to them. For instance, they know *Thoranyudham*, only as *Thoranyudham*. They neither knew that it is an act from *Abhisheka Nataka* written by Bhasa and nor were concerned about it.

There is not any *doshas* as such. There were just general things like the words should not be mispronounced, and no grammar error should be found etc.

Upendra Raghavendra: What is the concept of *Sthayibhava* while *Pakarnnattam* is done? The actor is shifting quickly from one character to another, and then how the actor can handle the *Sthayi*?

Rajaneesh Chakyar: When we are doing different characters, we should first understand the state of the character at that moment. For each and every state, we have typical movements, *mudras*, etc. And by understanding the state of the character, we can take ideas from the techniques that are taught during the *Koodiyattam* trainings. Using this techniques, and our *Manodharma*, we transform from one character to the other

Shereen Saif: In *Natyasastra*, Bharata enumerates the order of the *Rasas* beginning with *Sringara* and ending with *Adbhuta*. Whereas in practice, you might see a very different approach. What might have been his intention and rational when he enumerated that order? Did he expect the idealistic theatre experience should end in *Adbhuta*? But when the actors demonstrate the nine *Rasas* they do it in different orders. Can the actor has the freedom to do it any order?

The number and order of the *Rasas* are all given in Anandavardhana say there are 3 faculties for our mind. One is *Madhuriya*, the second, *Ardratha*, and that which gives *deepthi*. Anandavardhana says that *Sringara* gives *Madhuryam* to your mind. He further say that *Ardratha* is the most important one and which is there in *Vipralambha*; increase of *ardratha* results in *Karuna*. Later Bhavabhuti said that *Karuna* is the important and is the only *Rasa*; Bhojaraja said that *Sringara* is important one and we thought so. But for Bharata, all the eight *Rasas*, were of equal importance, are of our *Sthaibhava*, its inherent *Vasana* born with us. There is no difference or preferential treatment to any *Rasa* or any *Sthayi*, in Bharata.

Rajneesh Chakyar: There is no particular reason to fix the order when I demonstrate the nine *Rasas* We follow what is trained to us from our childhood. I was trained by Guru Ammannur Madhava Chakyar and I follow the order and system of *satvika Abhinaya and Nava Rasas*, which he taught. Another relevant thing I have found out is that, when doing *Nava Rasas*, we apply the breath technique and this order is appropriate for that. The *Rasa* which is close to *Sringara* in breath controlling is *Adbhuta*, then *Veera*. And from *Hasya*, then *Karuna* and the order goes like that and conclude with the *Shanta* and our breath will be back in the neutral state.

Ahalya Bellal: When you act, you sometimes put your hands on your stomach. What is that for? Gender neutrality?

Rajneesh: This is the basic posture for *Koodiyattam*. Our right hand will be held on the stomach and the left hand stretched sideward. This position is the same for male and female characters. Another thing we take the power from our waist or *kundalini*. Gender neutrality also might be there.

Renjitha Sreenath: Up to what extent can an actor transform to a character on stage? Can a performer experience *Satvika Bhava* like *Sthambha*, *romancha* etc on stage if he is in the state of neutrality? And if *Pakarnnattam* is not accepted by Bharata in *Natyasastra*, then how can one portray different characters on stage as a solo presentation?

Emotional involvement is less in *Pakarnnattam*. When an actor is fully involved in *Sringara* or *Karuna* or any other *rasa*, there is complete involvement in the action. When he is deeply involved in a particular emotion, he can never hide it and transform into something else. But, when he transforms from one character to another, it is more of an intellectual action. So in *Pakarnnattam*, the change is in the *Vibhavas*. In the *Pakarnnattam* of Siva and Parvathi, when she became jealous of Ganga, the conversation between Shiva and

Parvathy are enacted by *Pakarnnattam*. In this sequence *Sringara* is there, but if look into this sequence, more closely, we can see that the *Sringara* is not very deep. There is lesser involvement; there is no difference between the *Sringara* of Siva and Parvathi. I have always felt it as an intellectual exercise.

Now Bharata accept solo performances only in *Bhana*, where the performer is a narrator, and not an actor as a character. He narrates so many things, and there is no second actor. He does not transform from the persona of the narrator to his role. We could say that *Bhana* is Mono acting. *Pakarnnattam* is not Mono acting. It is more than that.

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