

# Rhythm in Sacred Narratives: the Mridangam in Itihasa and Puranic Literature

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**ABSTRACT :** *Rhythm occupies a significant place in Indian cultural and religious life, functioning not merely as a musical element but as a symbolic and ritual force. The Mridangam, a principal percussion instrument of South Indian classical music and dances like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, and Mohiniattam, is deeply rooted in sacred traditions and performance practices. This paper examines the representation and significance of the Mridangam and related percussion instruments in Itihasa (Epics) and Puranic literature, particularly in the Valmiki Ramayana, Vyasa Mahabharata, and selected Puranas of Bhagavata and Shiva. Through textual analysis of narrative contexts in which percussion instruments are mentioned, the study explores their ritual, aesthetic, and symbolic roles in sacred storytelling. The paper explains that references to the Mridangam and its proto-forms such as dundubhi, bheri, muraja, and panava reveal an early conception of rhythm as an organizing principle of cosmic and social order. These instruments appear in diverse contexts, including divine celebrations, royal ceremonies, sacrificial rituals, and battlefield proclamations, indicating their multifaceted function in sacred narratives. Beyond their practical role, percussion instruments are portrayed as carriers of auspiciousness, power, and spiritual resonance. By tracing these literary representations, the study establishes a continuity between mythic soundscapes and later classical music traditions. It further demonstrates how rhythm operates as a narrative device that enhances dramatic tension, ritual meaning, and devotional expression. The paper thus contributes to understanding the cultural history of the Mridangam and highlights the importance of sacred literature as a source for reconstructing early Indian musical thought.*

**KEYWORDS** - Mridangam; Itihasa; Puranas; Sacred Narrative; Rhythm

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Bharatiya civilization, sound has always been accorded profound metaphysical and cultural significance. Concepts such as *Nada* and *Shabda* are not merely acoustic phenomena but are regarded as manifestations of cosmic energy. In the aesthetic and philosophical discourse, the concepts of *Nada* (sound as vibration) and *Shabda* (sound as articulated expression) occupy a foundational position in the understanding of music, language, and cosmic order. These ideas are not merely technical or acoustic in nature; rather, they are deeply embedded within metaphysical frameworks that connect sound to creation, consciousness, and divine presence. Music and rhythm, therefore, function not only as artistic expressions but also as vehicles of ritual, devotion, and narrative communication. Among percussion instruments, the Mridangam occupies a central position in South Indian classical music and dance, serving as both a time-keeping and improvisatory instrument. *Nada* is often understood as the primordial, unstruck sound (*anahata Nada*), which is believed to underlie all manifested reality. In contrast, *Shabda* refers to sound that is articulated, perceptible, and structured, such as spoken language or musical

expression. The distinction between these two concepts reflects a broader philosophical differentiation between the unmanifest and the manifest, a theme that recurs across Indian philosophical traditions (Deva 1974; Sambamoorthy 1975). Within the context of Indian music, *Nada* is regarded as the essential source from which all musical tones emerge, while *Shabda* constitutes the audible and communicative dimension of sound. Together, they form a continuum that links the metaphysical origins of sound with its experiential and performative expressions.

The notion of sound as a creative and cosmic force finds rich expression in Indian epics and Puranic literature. In these texts, sound is frequently associated with divine creation, sacred utterance, and spiritual realization. The idea of *Nada brahman*, the identification of ultimate reality with sound suggests that the universe itself originates from a primordial vibration. In the *Natya Shastra*, attributed to Sage Bharata, sound is treated as a fundamental element of performance, linking music, speech, and dramatic expression within a unified aesthetic system (Ghosh 1951). Although primarily a treatise on dramaturgy, it reflects a worldview in which sound functions as both a sensory and spiritual medium. The *Puranas* further elaborate on this cosmological significance. The syllable *Om* (*Pranava*) is described as the primordial sound from which the universe emanates, symbolizing the unity of creation, preservation, and dissolution. This conception appears in texts such as the *Shiva Purana* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, where sound is not only a physical phenomenon but also a manifestation of divine consciousness. In the *Mahabharata*, sound assumes both symbolic and functional roles. The conch (*Shankha*) blasts of warriors such as Krishna and Arjuna signify not only the commencement of battle but also the assertion of dharma. These sonic acts are imbued with spiritual meaning, suggesting that sound operates as a carrier of ethical and cosmic order. Similarly, in the *Ramayana*, musical and vocal expressions are associated with devotion, emotion, and narrative progression. The recitation of sacred verses and the use of musical instruments contribute to the evocation of *rasa* (aesthetic experience), reinforcing the connection between sound and emotional as well as spiritual communication.

While *Nada* represents the vibrational essence of sound, *Shabda* is closely linked to linguistic philosophy, particularly within the framework of *Mimamsa* and *Vyakarana* traditions. In these schools, *Shabda* is considered a valid means of knowledge (*Shabda Pramana*), especially in the transmission of sacred texts such as the Vedas. The grammarian-philosopher Bhartruhari, in his work *Vakyapadiya*, introduces the concept of *Shabda brahman*, suggesting that language and ultimate reality are intrinsically connected. According to this view, meaning is not merely constructed through individual words but emerges from an indivisible unity of sound and sense (Iyer 1972). In musical practice, *Shabda* manifests as structured sound, notes (*svara*), rhythmic syllables (*solkattu*), and lyrical compositions. It is through *Shabda* that the abstract principle of *Nada* becomes accessible to human perception and artistic expression. Thus, the act of music-making can be understood as a transformation of cosmic vibration into meaningful sonic form. The relationship between *Nada* and *Shabda* is central to the aesthetics of Indian classical music. While *Nada* provides the ontological basis of sound, *Shabda* enables its articulation within specific musical systems. This duality is reflected in the emphasis on both tonal purity and expressive clarity in performance. In Carnatic music, the production of sound is not merely a technical process but a disciplined practice aimed at aligning the performer with the deeper essence of *Nada*. The cultivation of tone (*Nada Shuddha*) is considered essential, as it directly influences the aesthetic and spiritual impact of the music. At the same time, the articulation of rhythmic syllables and lyrical content represents the domain of *Shabda*, through which meaning and structure are communicated. The integration of these two dimensions is particularly evident in percussion traditions such as the Mridangam. The instrument produces both resonant tonal vibrations and clearly articulated rhythmic patterns, embodying the interplay between *Nada* and *Shabda*. Through performance, the percussionist transforms abstract rhythmic concepts into audible forms that engage both the intellect and the senses. The concepts of *Nada* and *Shabda* offer a profound framework for understanding Indian music as both a metaphysical and aesthetic practice. Rooted in philosophical traditions and elaborated in epics and *Puranic* literature, these ideas reveal sound as a bridge between the material and the transcendental. While *Nada* represents the primordial vibration underlying all existence, *Shabda* embodies its manifest expression in language and music. In the context of musical performance, this relationship underscores the importance of both tonal refinement and expressive articulation. By engaging with these principles, Indian music transcends mere auditory experience and becomes a

medium for spiritual reflection and aesthetic realization. While modern scholarship has extensively studied the technical and performance aspects of the Mridangam, its presence in early sacred literature has received comparatively limited attention. The Itihasas namely the Ramayana and Mahabharata and the vast corpus of Puranic literature provide rich descriptions of musical activity, ritual performance, and divine celebration. Percussion instruments such as the *dundubhi*, *bheri*, *muraja*, *panava*, and *mridanga* are frequently mentioned in these texts, often in contexts charged with symbolic and ceremonial meaning.

This paper seeks to examine these references to understand how rhythm and percussion function within sacred narratives. By analyzing literary depictions of drums and rhythmic sound, the study aims to reconstruct early cultural attitudes toward percussion and its association with power, auspiciousness, devotion, and cosmic order. In doing so, it situates the Mridangam not merely as a classical instrument but as a continuation of a long-standing sacred sound tradition rooted in India's epic and Puranic imagination.

## II. MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN ITIHASA AND PURANIC TRADITIONS

Indian sacred literature presents a richly textured soundscape in which music and instruments play a significant role. The classification of instruments into *tata* (string), *sushira* (wind), *avanaddha* (percussion), and *ghana* (solid) is implicitly reflected in narrative descriptions.

**चतुर्विधं वाद्यजातं ततो ज्ञेयं प्रयत्नतः ।**

**ततं च सुषिरं चैव घनं चावनद्धमेव च ॥** (Natya Shastra, Chapter 28, verse 1)

Meaning:

“Musical instruments are to be known as fourfold: stringed (*tata*), wind (*sushira*), solid (*ghana*), and covered (*avanaddha*).”

The fourfold classification of musical instruments in the *Natya Shastra* reveals a sophisticated understanding of sound production, one that integrates physical, aesthetic, and philosophical dimensions. By categorizing instruments into *tata*, *avanaddha*, *sushira*, and *ghana*, Bharata not only provides a practical framework for performers and scholars but also reflects a deeper engagement with the nature of sound as a fundamental element of artistic expression. What makes this system particularly enduring is its adaptability. Even in contemporary musicology, these categories continue to serve as a useful basis for analyzing instruments across diverse musical traditions. More importantly, they remind us that in Indian thought, music is not merely an arrangement of sounds but a carefully structured manifestation of *Nada*, shaped through different material forms and brought to life through performance. Percussion instruments are associated with ritual efficacy, royal authority, and divine celebration. Their sound is often described as resonant, powerful, and capable of invoking both awe and joy. The term *avanaddha vadya* refers to instruments in which sound is produced by striking a stretched membrane, typically made of animal skin. This category includes a wide range of percussion instruments such as the Mridangam, Pakhavaj, and various drums used in ritual and theatrical contexts. In the *Natya Shastra*, these instruments are described as essential for maintaining rhythmic structure and enhancing the dramatic impact of performance. The rhythmic patterns produced by membranophones provide a temporal framework within which melody and movement unfold. At the same time, these instruments are capable of remarkable tonal variation, especially in the case of the Mridangam, where different strokes produce distinct pitches and timbres. Beyond their functional role, *avanaddha vadya* also contribute to the dynamic and energetic aspects of performance. Their sounds can evoke a sense of movement, tension, and release, thereby playing a crucial role in the evocation of *rasa*. In many ways, they serve as the pulse of the performance, connecting the physicality of rhythm with the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of the art form (Deva 1974).

Although the modern term “Mridangam” becomes prominent in later musicological texts, earlier literature employs a range of terms such as *dundubhi*, *bheri*, *muraja*, *panava*, and *mridanga*. These terms refer to different types of drums, varying in size, shape, and function. Descriptions of these instruments suggest both battlefield usage and ceremonial performance.

The semantic field of these terms points to a continuity between early drum traditions and the later classical Mridangam. Their association with resonance, rhythm, and public proclamation highlights their social and ritual importance.

**मृदङ्गपणवादीनि वाद्यान्यावनद्धकानि च ।** (Sangita Ratnakara, Chapter 6, verse 5)

Meaning:

“Mridanga, panava and similar instruments belong to the class of covered (percussion) instruments.”

The classification of the Mridangam within the category of covered or membranophonic instruments finds clear articulation in the *Vadya Adhyaya* of the Sangita Ratnakara, where the verse “मृदङ्गपणवादीनि वाद्यान्यावनद्धकानि च” explicitly identifies the Mridangam, *panava*, and related instruments as belonging to the *avanaddha vadya* class. This categorization is significant not merely as a technical classification but as evidence of the already well-established status of the Mridangam within the medieval musicological tradition. The use of the term Mridangam in a systematic and taxonomical context indicates that the instrument had moved beyond a generic reference to a drum and had acquired a precise identity within the framework of classical Indian organology. Furthermore, this textual reference demonstrates a clear continuity between earlier references to barrel-shaped drums in epic and Puranic literature and their later codification in formal treatises. The inclusion of the Mridangam alongside instruments such as the *panava* suggests not only its functional importance in musical and performative contexts but also its integration into a broader, evolving tradition of percussion instruments. Thus, the Sangita Ratnakara serves as a crucial link in tracing the historical and conceptual continuity of the Mridangam, bridging the gap between its early appearances in narrative literature and its fully developed role in classical music systems.

### III. Mridangam in Sacred Narratives

In sacred narratives, musical instruments are rarely treated as mere objects used for producing sound; instead, they function as meaningful participants within the ritual and narrative framework. Their presence often signals that an event of great importance is unfolding. Whether it is a royal coronation, a divine wedding, or a sacred ritual such as a *yagna*, the sounding of instruments creates an atmosphere that is both celebratory and sanctified. The act of playing these instruments is not just decorative but performative, it announces, affirms, and elevates the significance of the moment. In many instances, the sound itself is believed to carry auspicious energy, preparing both the space and the participants for a transition into a sacred state. At the same time, instruments also contribute to storytelling by enhancing the emotional and symbolic layers of the narrative. They help shape how an event is perceived and experienced by those present, both within the story and among its listeners or readers. For example, the rhythmic beat of drums may evoke grandeur and power during a king’s coronation, while softer or melodic sounds may accompany moments of devotion or divine revelation. In this way, instruments become extensions of the narrative voice, reinforcing themes of joy, devotion, victory, or transformation. Their role goes beyond accompaniment, they actively participate in creating meaning, linking sound, ritual, and emotion into a unified expressive experience.

The Ramayana contains numerous references to musical instruments in royal and divine contexts. Drums are sounded during coronations, weddings, and celebrations in Kosala, Lanka and other kingdoms. In descriptions of Lanka and celestial assemblies, percussion instruments contribute to the grandeur of the narrative setting. Drums are also used to announce significant events and to symbolize joy or triumph. Their rhythmic presence enhances the dramatic quality of the epic and underscores the ceremonial nature of political and divine action.

**ततः प्रवृत्ते शब्दो भेर्यः पणवगोमुखाः ।**

**मृदङ्गतूर्यनिर्घोषैः पूरयन्तो वसुन्धराम् ॥** (Valmiki Ramayana, Ayodhya Kanda, Sarga 4)

Meaning:

“Then arose the sound of *bheris*, *panavas*, and *gomukhas*; the earth was filled with the resonance of Mridangam and other instruments.”

The above verse from the Ramayana offers a vivid sonic description of a royal ceremonial moment, where the atmosphere is transformed through the collective resonance of musical instruments. The mention of *bheri*, *panava*, and *gomukha*, along with the Mridangam and other instruments, suggests a richly layered soundscape that accompanies the coronation setting. This is not merely an incidental detail; rather, it reflects how sound is used to

signify grandeur, legitimacy, and auspiciousness. The phrase “filling the earth” conveys the magnitude and intensity of the sonic experience, indicating that the event is not confined to a physical space but resonates across the entire realm, symbolically uniting the people in a shared moment of celebration. From a cultural and performative perspective, this passage highlights the integral role of percussion and wind instruments in royal and ritual contexts. The Mridangam appears as part of an established ensemble of instruments used to mark significant occasions. Its inclusion alongside other ceremonial instruments indicates its importance within early musical practices and suggests continuity with later classical traditions. More broadly, the verse demonstrates how sound operates as a powerful narrative device in epic literature enhancing emotional intensity, reinforcing the sacredness of the occasion, and embodying the collective joy and reverence associated with the coronation. In this way, musical instruments function not only as elements of performance but also as carriers of symbolic meaning within the epic tradition.

In the Mahabharata, percussion instruments appear in courtly assemblies, sacrificial rituals, and warfare. Drums signal the commencement of battles and proclaim royal authority. They also accompany dance and song during festive occasions. Symbolically, the rhythmic beat of drums in the Mahabharata often contrasts with the chaos of war, suggesting an underlying order within conflict.

**भेर्यः पणवदुन्दुभ्यो निनदुस्तत्र भारत ।**

**शङ्खानां च महास्वनः प्रादुरासीन्महात्मनाम् ॥** (Vyasa Mahabharata, Bhishma Parva, Adhyaya 20)

Meaning:

“The *bheris*, *panavas*, and *dundubhis* resounded, O Bharata! along with the great sound of conches.”

The verse from the Mahabharata presents a powerful auditory image that captures the charged atmosphere of the battlefield. The resounding of *bheri*, *panava*, and *dundubhi*, along with the deep and far-reaching sound of conches (*Shankha*), creates an overwhelming sonic environment that signals the commencement of a momentous event. These sounds are not incidental; they function as markers of transition, announcing the shift from anticipation to action. The collective resonance of these instruments evokes a sense of intensity, urgency, and grandeur, reflecting the scale and seriousness of the impending conflict. Beyond their practical role in communication and coordination, these instruments carry symbolic weight within the narrative. The sounding of drums and conches is often associated with the assertion of power, the invocation of divine presence, and the upholding of *dharma*. In the context of the Mahabharata, such sounds can be understood as embodying both the external reality of war and its deeper moral and cosmic dimensions. The conch holds sacred significance, often linked with divine figures and spiritual authority, while the drums reinforce the collective energy and momentum of the assembled forces. Together, these sonic elements contribute to the dramatic and emotional intensity of the narrative, illustrating how sound operates as a vital expressive and symbolic force within epic literature. This reinforces the idea of rhythm as a structuring force in both narrative and cosmology.

The *Puranas* depict a cosmic soundscape populated by divine musicians and dancers. Percussion instruments accompany Shiva’s dance, Vishnu’s divine manifestations, and celestial celebrations. Drums are associated with Shiva’s *Ganas* and with ritual processions. These references emphasize the sacred character of rhythmic sound. The drum becomes a symbol of divine energy and cosmic rhythm, resonating with philosophical notions of creation, preservation, and dissolution.

**ताण्डवे समये देवो मृदङ्गपणवान्वितः ।**

**ननर्त सह गन्धर्वैर्गणैश्च सह शङ्करः ॥** (Shiva Purana)

Meaning:

“At the time of the Tandava, Shiva danced accompanied by mridanga and panava, together with the gandharvas and ganas.”

The above verse, attributed to the Shiva Purana tradition, presents a deeply symbolic and evocative image of Shiva in the act of Tandava, the cosmic dance. In this description, Shiva is not alone; he is accompanied by the sounds of the Mridangam and *panava*, along with the presence of *gandharvas* (celestial musicians) and *ganas* (his divine attendants). The inclusion of these instruments within the scene highlights the inseparable relationship between sound, movement, and cosmic energy. The dance of Shiva is not merely a physical act but a metaphysical

expression of creation, preservation, and dissolution, and the accompanying music becomes an integral part of this cosmic process.

The presence of the Mridangam in particular is significant, as it suggests that rhythmic sound plays a foundational role in sustaining the dynamic movement of the universe. The beats of the drum may be interpreted as symbolizing the pulse of creation itself, echoing the idea that rhythm underlies all forms of existence. Similarly, the *panava* adds to the layered sonic texture, reinforcing the intensity and vitality of the performance. The participation of celestial beings further elevates the scene, transforming it into a divine ensemble where music, dance, and spirituality converge. In this context, instruments are not passive accompaniments but active agents that facilitate the expression of cosmic order and divine energy.

From a broader perspective, this passage illustrates how musical instruments in Puranic literature transcend their functional role and acquire symbolic meaning. The association of the Mridangam with Shiva's Tandava underscores its sacred status and its connection to divine performance traditions. It also reflects a continuity between mythological imagination and later classical practices, where rhythm and percussion remain central to dance and musical expression. Thus, the verse not only enriches the narrative imagery but also reinforces the philosophical idea that sound (*Nada*) and rhythm are fundamental to the structure of the universe.

### वादित्राणि विचित्राणि वादयन्ति स्म तत्क्षणे ।

मृदङ्गाः पनवाः शङ्खा नेदुर्दुभयो मुहुः ॥ (Bhagavata Purana)

Meaning

“At that moment, various musical instruments began to be played; mridangas, panavas, conches, and dundubhis resounded repeatedly.”

This passage from the Bhagavata Purana offers a vivid representation of sound as an essential component of divine celebration. The mention of Mridangam, alongside instruments such as *panava*, *Shankha*, and *dundubhi*, reflects a well-established musical culture in which percussion instruments play a central role in marking sacred and joyous occasions. The verse does not treat music as a mere background element; rather, it foregrounds sound as an active and transformative presence that defines the emotional and spiritual atmosphere of the moment. The inclusion of the Mridangam is particularly noteworthy, as it indicates that this instrument, or its early form, was already associated with devotional and communal expressions of joy. The repeated sounding of these instruments suggests continuity and intensity, creating a sense of collective participation in the divine event. In narratives associated with the life of Krishna, such musical descriptions often accompany moments of divine manifestation, celebration, or communal gathering, reinforcing the idea that sound functions as a medium through which the sacred becomes perceptible. From a broader perspective, this verse highlights the role of percussion in shaping ritual and devotional experiences. The rhythmic resonance of the Mridangam can be understood as structuring the temporal flow of the event, while also energizing the participants and enhancing the emotional intensity of the celebration. The convergence of multiple instruments creates a layered soundscape that mirrors the richness of the divine moment being described. Furthermore, this reference supports the argument that the Mridangam has a long-standing presence within the Indian musical imagination, extending from early textual traditions into later classical practice. Even when not described in technical detail, its repeated appearance in sacred literature suggests both familiarity and cultural significance. Thus, the Bhagavata Purana contributes to the historical continuity of the instrument, situating it within a devotional and performative context that continues to resonate in contemporary musical traditions.

Across Epic and Puranic literature, percussion instruments appear in *yajnas*, temple rites, and public ceremonies. Their sound functions as an invocation and as a purifier of ritual space. The timing and rhythmic regularity of drums align with ritual cycles, reinforcing the relationship between rhythm and sacred order. The drum symbolizes power, time, and cosmic movement. Its sound is often linked with divine presence and royal legitimacy. The association of rhythm with emotional expression, joy, awe, and devotion, reveals its aesthetic dimension. Rather than serving merely as accompaniment, percussion becomes a narrative device that heightens dramatic effect and spiritual intensity. The epic and Puranic representation of percussion provides a foundation for later developments in classical music. The ritual and symbolic functions of drums evolve into the refined performance practices of

the Mridangam in Carnatic music. This continuity demonstrates that classical percussion is not an isolated art form but the culmination of sacred, social, and aesthetic traditions described in early literature.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Itihasa and Puranic representations of percussion reveal that rhythm was conceived as a sacred and structuring force. Drums signify ritual order, royal authority, and divine movement. These literary depictions provide the cultural substratum for the later development of the Mridangam as a classical instrument. By tracing epic and Puranic references, this study highlights the continuity between sacred narrative and musical practice. Rhythm emerges not merely as temporal regulation but as symbolic expression of cosmic and social harmony. Further research may extend this inquiry to iconography and temple performance traditions. The study of the Mridangam in Itihasa and Puranic literature reveals that rhythm occupies a vital place in sacred narrative. Percussion instruments are portrayed as ritual tools, symbols of authority, and expressions of cosmic order. These representations illuminate the cultural history of rhythm and contribute to understanding the origins of classical Indian percussion. By tracing literary references to rhythmic sound, the paper highlights the deep interconnection between music, myth, and ritual in Indian civilization. Future research may extend this inquiry to iconographic evidence and regional performance traditions.

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