

***Nāṭyaśāstra*: A Fundamental Treatise for Aesthetics and Performing Art Traditions**

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Abstract:

The Nāṭyaśāstra attributed to the great sage Bharata Muni occupies a foundational position in the intellectual and cultural history of ancient India and believed to have been composed between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE. It is one of the earliest surviving systematic Sanskrit treatises dealing comprehensively with drama, dance, music, acting, stagecraft, aesthetics, theatrical architecture, costumes, gestures, bodily movements and the psychological processes through which artistic performance produces an aesthetic experience in the spectator. Although commonly described as a treatise on dramaturgy, the Nāṭyaśāstra is considerably wider in scope. It presents Nāṭya as an integrated art in which dramatic representation, dance, music, gesture, speech, costume, architecture and emotional expression operate together. The historical environment in which the Nāṭyaśāstra developed was characterized by interaction between ritual traditions, courtly culture, popular entertainment, religious performance and developing literary traditions. The treatise reflects a sophisticated performance culture in which theatre was not merely entertainment but an important medium for communicating moral, social, religious and emotional ideas.

Keywords: Bharata Muni, Nāṭyaśāstra, Abhinaya: Āṅgika, Vācika, Āhārya and Sāttvika. Śṛṅgāra, Hāsyā, Karuṇa, Raudra, Vīra, Bhayānaka, Bībhatsa, Adbhuta.

Introduction

For the study of *Nāṭyaśāstra* under the significance of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*
Ancient Indian History and Archaeology, extends beyond the history of Performing

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arts. Often described as the "Fifth Veda" (*Panchama Veda*), the text codifies the principles of performance and establishes the theoretical foundations that continue to influence Indian classical dance, theatre and music traditions.

Comprising of approximately 6,000 verses distributed over 36 chapters, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* presents a holistic framework that integrates artistic expression with philosophical, spiritual, and social dimensions of life. The text not only serves as a manual for performers but also articulates a sophisticated theory of aesthetics through the concept of *Rasa*, which remains central to Indian artistic discourse. For researchers in dance studies, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides invaluable insights into the origins, evolution and theoretical underpinnings of Indian performance traditions.

The scope of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is consequently remarkably broad. Its treatment of drama includes the construction of the playhouse, dramatic structure, types of plays, characters, acting, gestures, movement, music and stage conventions. The first chapter of Ghosh's translation, for example, deals with the origin of drama and extends over pages 1–17 of Volume I. The subsequent chapters elaborate the architectural organisation of the theatre, preliminary ceremonies, dramatic representation and different aspects of performance. Ghosh's contents further indicate that the text contains extensive discussions of dance,

karaṇas, gestures, bodily positions, movements and histrionic representation.

One of the most significant contributions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is its systematic treatment of *abhinaya*. The term broadly denotes the means through which meaning, action and emotion are communicated to the spectator. Bharata identifies four principal forms of *abhinaya*: *āṅgika*, *vācika*, *āhārya* and *sāttvika*. *Āṅgika abhinaya* involves the physical expression of the body and its limbs; *vācika* concerns speech and verbal expression; *āhārya* relates to costume, ornaments, make-up and external appearance; while *sāttvika* concerns the involuntary or internal manifestations of emotional states. This classification is particularly relevant to the study of Indian sculpture because sculptural representation is inherently visual and bodily. Although a sculpture cannot reproduce speech or actual movement, the sculptor can communicate posture, gesture, costume, ornamentation and emotional expression through the static human form.

Adding further to the above, the theory of *Rasa* constitutes another central aspect of Bharata's aesthetic thought. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* explains aesthetic experience through the relationship between *vibhāva*, *anubhāva*, *vyabhicāribhāva* and the enduring *sthāyibhāva*. In the context of performance, these elements combine to produce *rasa*, the aesthetic experience apprehended by the sensitive spectator. This theoretical framework becomes

particularly useful when analysing sculptural representations in which emotion is communicated through facial expression, bodily posture, gesture, interaction between figures, costume and contextual attributes. Consequently, the study of dance sculptures need not be confined to identifying physical postures; it may also consider the emotional and aesthetic dimensions encoded within those postures.

In this context, Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides an indispensable theoretical foundation for examining the relationship between dance, bodily representation and visual culture in India. Its detailed discussions of movement, gesture, posture, emotional expression and aesthetic experience enable the researcher to investigate, how the principles associated with performance may have been translated into the visual language of the sculpture.

Thus, the text serves not only as a treatise on ancient Indian theatre but also as an important intellectual source for reconstructing the conceptual relationship between the performing and visual arts.

Therefore, for the study of dance sculptures, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* can consequently be employed as one of the basic and principal textual sources for identifying and interpreting bodily postures, gestures, movement vocabulary and expressive dimensions represented in stone through the beautiful carving.

Authorship and Historical Background

The authorship of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is traditionally attributed to Bharata Muni, a legendary sage whose historical identity remains a subject of scholarly debate till date. While exact dates are uncertain, most scholars place the composition of the text between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, suggesting that it evolved over several centuries through the contributions of multiple authors and redactors.

The socio-cultural milieu of ancient India played a significant role in shaping the treatise. During this period, dramatic performances, ritual enactments, storytelling traditions, and musical practices were flourishing across the Indian subcontinent. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* emerged as a systematic effort to codify these diverse practices into a unified theoretical framework. The text reflects the intellectual richness of ancient Indian civilization, where art was viewed not merely as entertainment but as a medium of education, moral instruction, spiritual upliftment and social harmony.

According to the mythological account narrated in the opening chapters of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the traditional account of the origin of *nāṭya* is explained in the first chapter. According to Bharata's mythological stance, the gods requested Brahmā to create an art accessible to all sections of society. Then, the creator god Brahma composed/created *Nāṭyaveda* by drawing elements from the four Vedas:

recitation from the *Rigveda*, music from the *Samaveda*, acting from the *Yajurveda*, and emotional experience from the *Atharvaveda*. Bharata and his hundred sons were entrusted with the task of disseminating this divine art form among humanity. This narrative underscores the sacred status accorded to performance traditions in ancient India.

The term *nāṭya* is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *nat*, associated with acting, representation and performance. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, however, *nāṭya* has a much wider meaning than the modern English term "drama."

Nāṭya combines several forms of artistic expression:

- dramatic representation;
- acting;
- dance;
- music;
- poetry;
- bodily movement;
- gesture;
- costume;
- stage architecture;
- emotional expression; and
- aesthetic communication.

The comprehensive character of *nāṭya* is important for archaeological interpretation because temple sculpture frequently precisely combines these categories. A sculptural panel may depict a dancer accompanied by musicians; another may show a deity in a dance posture; another may portray a dramatic narrative involving several characters.

Such representations cannot always be understood solely as "dance sculptures." They may constitute visual representations of a broader performance culture.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* therefore provides a conceptual framework for interpreting movement, gesture, posture and emotional expression in visual art.

Therefore, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* demonstrates the elevated cultural status attributed to *nāṭya*. By presenting theatre as a fifth Veda, the text establishes it as a comprehensive cultural form capable of communicating knowledge and experience through multiple artistic media.

Structure and Contents of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is generally transmitted in **36 chapters**, depending upon the edition, and contains approximately six thousand verses. Manmohan Ghosh's English translation remains one of the most frequently cited English translations for academic research. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is encyclopedic in scope, addressing every aspect of theatrical production and performance. Its chapters cover topics such as:

- Origin and purpose of drama
- Construction of theatre buildings (*Nāṭyamandapa*)
- Stage design and architecture
- Acting techniques (*Abhinaya*)
- Dance movements and gestures
- Music and rhythmic structures
- Costume and make-up

- Characterization and dramatic composition
- Emotional expression and aesthetic experience
- Rules governing performance and audience reception

The text demonstrates a remarkable understanding of the interconnected nature of various performing arts. Rather than treating dance, drama, and music as separate disciplines, Bharata presents them as complementary components of a unified artistic system. This integrated approach remains one of the defining characteristics of Indian classical performance traditions.

The Concept of Rasa: The Soul of Indian Aesthetics

One of the most influential contributions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is its formulation of the *Rasa* theory. The sixth chapter, traditionally known as the *Rasādhyāya*, and the seventh chapter, the *Bhāvādhyāya*, together constitute the foundation of Bharata's aesthetic theory.

The term *Rasa* literally means "essence," "flavour," or "aesthetic relish." Bharata argues that the ultimate objective of artistic performance is the generation of *Rasa* in the minds of the spectators.

The famous aphorism, "*Vibhavanubhava-vyabhichari-samyogad rasa-nispattih*,"

Explains that *Rasa* emerges from the interaction of determinants (*Vibhava*), consequents (*Anubhava*), and transitory emotional states (*Vyabhichari Bhava*).

This is conventionally understood as indicating that aesthetic experience arises through the conjunction of *vibhāva*, *anubhāva* and *vyabhicāri-bhāva* with the appropriate *sthāyi-bhāva*.

The eight principal *rasas* identified in Bharata's system are:

Rasa	Associated Sthāyi-bhāva	General significance
1. Śṛṅgāra	Rati	Love/erotic sentiment
2. Hāsyā	Hāsa	Comic sentiment
3. Karuṇa	Śoka	Pathos
4. Raudra	Krodha	Fury
5. Vīra	Utsāha	Heroism
6. Bhayānaka	Bhaya	Fear
7. Bībhatsa	Jugupsā	Disgust
8. Adbhuta	Vismaya	Wonder
Later aesthetic theorists, particularly Abhinavagupta, added the ninth Rasa:		
9. Śānta (Tranquillity)		

The *Rasa* theory remains as the *Soul of Dramaturgy* and one of the most sophisticated aesthetic theories in world art history. Unlike Western theories that often emphasize imitation or representation, Bharata's framework focuses on the transformative emotional experience of the audience. The spectator becomes an active participant in the artistic process, experiencing universalized emotions that transcend personal limitations.

Bhāva and the Psychology of Expression

The concept of *Bhāva* is inseparable from *Rasa*. Bharata explains different categories of emotional states that participate in performance.

The principal categories include:

Sthāyi-bhāva

The *sthāyi-bhāva* is the dominant or enduring emotional disposition that becomes aesthetically transformed into *rasa*. For example, *rati* is associated with *śṛṅgāra*, while *utsāha* is associated with *vīra*.

Vibhāva

Vibhāva refers to the determinants or causes through which an emotional state is manifested.

Two important divisions are:

- **Ālambanavibhāva** – the person or object serving as the basis of emotion;
- **Uddīpanavibhāva** – circumstances, surroundings or stimulants that intensify the emotion.

For example, in a representation of a romantic scene, the lover and beloved may function as *ālambanavibhāvas*, while gardens, music, moonlight, ornaments and other environmental features may operate as *uddīpanavibhāvas*.

Anubhāva

Anubhāva refers to the consequent physical expressions through which an internal emotional condition becomes perceptible. Facial expression, movement of the eyes, gestures, bodily posture and

other expressive actions may communicate the emotional state.

Vyabhicāri-bhāva

These are transitory or complementary emotional states that assist in developing the dominant emotional condition. Bharata identifies a large range of such states, including anxiety, doubt, fatigue, remembrance, shame, excitement, impatience and others.

Sāttvika-bhāva

The *sāttvika-bhāvas* are involuntary bodily manifestations associated with intense emotional experience, such as trembling, perspiration, horripilation, change of voice, tears, paralysis and changes in complexion.

The distinction among these categories is highly significant for the study of sculpture. Sculptors cannot reproduce every psychological process literally, but they can translate selected expressive features into a visual form.

Abhinaya: The Art of Expression

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides a detailed analysis of *Abhinaya*, the means through which performers communicate meaning and emotion. Bharata classifies *Abhinaya* into four categories:

Angika Abhinaya

This refers to bodily expression, including movements of the limbs, torso, head, eyes, eyebrows, neck, and facial muscles. The text meticulously describes various gestures (*Mudras*) and bodily postures used to convey specific meanings and emotions.

Vācika Abhinaya

This encompasses speech, dialogue, intonation, recitation, singing, and vocal expression. Bharata emphasizes the importance of proper pronunciation, modulation, and rhythmic delivery in enhancing dramatic effectiveness.

Āhārya Abhinaya

This includes costumes, ornaments, make-up, stage properties, and visual elements that contribute to characterization and atmosphere. The Jewellery, headdresses, garments, weapons and other attributes may assist in identifying a deity, character or social identity.

Sāttvika Abhinaya

Considered the highest form of expression, Sāttvika Abhinaya involves the genuine manifestation of inner emotional states, such as tears, trembling, perspiration, and changes in complexion. These involuntary responses signify profound emotional involvement and authenticity.

The theory of *Abhinaya* continues to form the pedagogical foundation of Indian classical dance forms such as BharataNāṭyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Mohiniyattam, Manipuri, Kathakali, and Sattriya.

Dance in the Nāṭyaśāstra

Dance occupies a central position in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Bharata distinguishes between *Nritta* (pure dance), *Nritya*

(expressive dance), and *Nāṭya* (dramatic representation).

Nritta: *Nritta* refers to abstract, rhythmic movement devoid of explicit narrative content. It emphasizes technique, geometry, rhythm, and aesthetic beauty.

Nritya: *Nritya* combines movement with emotional expression and storytelling. Through gestures and facial expressions, dancers communicate narrative and symbolic meanings.

Nāṭya: *Nāṭya* integrates dance, drama, music, and dialogue into a comprehensive theatrical performance.

The treatise also describes:

- 108 *Karanas* (dance movements)
- *Mandalas* (body positions)
- *Charis* (leg movements)
- *Āṅgahāra* (garland of movements)
- *Sthanas* (standing postures)
- *Bhramaris* (turns and spins)

A *Karāṇa* is a coordinated movement involving different limbs. Bharata traditionally describes **108 karāṇas**. The *Karāṇa* system is one of the most important areas connecting the textual tradition of dance with visual representations in Indian temples.

A *Karāṇa* should not simply be understood as a static pose. It represents a coordinated movement in which different parts of the body participate.

The concept of **Cārī** relates to movements of the feet and legs, while *Maṇḍalas* involve coordinated bodily

positions and spatial arrangements. *Aṅgahāra* represents combinations or sequences involving *karaṇas*.

These concepts provide a technical vocabulary through which scholars can compare dance treatises and sculptural representations.

Modern studies of South Indian temples have demonstrated the value of this approach. Bindu S. Shankar's doctoral research, for example, examined the representation of the 108 *karaṇas* in South Indian temple contexts and emphasized the broader significance of dance imagery within temple environments.

These principles continue to influence contemporary choreography and dance pedagogy.

Music and Rhythm in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* contains extensive discussions on music theory. Bharata explores concepts related to:

- Musical notes (*Swaras*)
- Scales
- Melodic structures
- Instruments
- Rhythmic patterns (*Tala*)
- Vocal techniques

The text classifies musical instruments into four categories:

1. String instruments (*Tat Vadya*)
2. Wind instruments (*Sushira Vadya*)
3. Percussion instruments
(*Avanaddha Vadya*)
4. Solid instruments (*Ghana Vadya*)

These classifications remain relevant in Indian musicology today. The rhythmic sophistication described in the treatise laid the groundwork for later developments in both Carnatic and Hindustani music traditions.

Relevance of *Nāṭyaśāstra* in Contemporary Dance Research

The significance of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* extends far beyond historical interest. It continues to serve as a foundational text for contemporary dance scholarship, performance practice, and interdisciplinary research purposes.

For dance researchers, the text provides:

- Historical evidence of ancient performance traditions
- Theoretical frameworks for movement analysis
- Insights into embodied aesthetics
- Foundations for performance studies
- Models for interdisciplinary artistic practice

Modern scholars have also engaged critically with the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, examining issues related to gender, performance, embodiment, cultural transmission, and the evolution of classical traditions. The text has become an important resource for comparative aesthetics, theatre studies, anthropology, and cultural history.

In contemporary performance contexts, choreographers frequently reinterpret Bharata's principles to address modern themes while maintaining continuity with

classical traditions. Such adaptations demonstrate the enduring vitality and relevance of the treatise.

Critical Evaluation

While the *Nāṭyaśāstra* remains a monumental achievement, contemporary scholarship acknowledges that it reflects specific historical and cultural contexts. Some aspects require reinterpretation when applied to modern performance environments. Nevertheless, its systematic approach to aesthetics, embodiment, emotional communication, and artistic training continues to offer valuable insights.

The universality of its aesthetic principles has attracted international scholarly attention. Comparisons with Aristotle's *Poetics*, Chinese performance theories, and modern performance studies have highlighted the unique contributions of Bharata's thought to global aesthetic discourse.

The treatise's emphasis on the relationship between performer, performance and spectator remains particularly relevant in contemporary discussions of performativity and audience engagement.

Conclusion

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* stands as one of the most remarkable achievements in the history of world aesthetics and performance theory. Attributed to Bharata Muni and composed during the early centuries surrounding the Common Era, it established a comprehensive framework

encompassing drama, dance, music, architecture, aesthetics, and emotional expression. Its theories of *Rasa* and *Abhinaya* continue to shape Indian classical dance traditions and influence contemporary artistic practices.

Also, Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* represents one of the most important intellectual achievements of ancient Indian civilization. Its importance lies not merely in its discussion of drama but in its comprehensive understanding of artistic representation. Through the concepts of *rasa*, *bhāva*, *abhinaya*, *karaṇa*, *cārī*, *maṇḍala*, *aṅgaḥāra*, music, costume and stagecraft, Bharata established a theoretical system in which different artistic disciplines were understood as interconnected.

For researchers in dance studies, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is not merely a historical document but a living text that offers profound insights into the philosophy and practice of performance. Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to bridge the artistic, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of human experience. As a foundational source of Indian performing arts, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* remains indispensable for understanding the evolution, theory, and continuing vitality of dance and theatre traditions in India and beyond.

Therefore, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* should be employed as a comparative and interpretative framework rather than as automatic proof of textual dependence. For the discipline of Ancient History and

Archaeology, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides an invaluable textual source for interpreting the visual evidence of dance and performance preserved in Indian temples. A rigorous archaeological study must combine textual evidence with sculptural analysis, iconography, chronology, architectural context and, wherever possible, inscriptions and other contemporary sources available.

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