



Influence and Implementation of Natyaśāstra Principles in the Sculptural Program of Ancient Indian Temples

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Abstract

The Natyaśāstra, attributed to the greatest sage of all the times i.e, Bharata Muni which is composed between approximately 200 BCE and 200 CE, is one of the foundational treatises of Indian aesthetics, performance, dance, music and dramaturgy. While primarily conceived as a manual for theatrical performance, its influence extended far beyond the stage, shaping various forms of Indian visual and performing arts. Ancient Indian temple sculptures, particularly those depicting dancers, musicians, celestial beings and divine narratives, reveal a profound engagement with the aesthetic and technical principles outlined in the Natyaśāstra. This article examines how the concepts of rasa, bhava, mudra, karana, and bodily movement described in the Natyaśāstra were translated into the sculptural language of Indian temple architecture, thereby transforming a mere stone into a medium of dynamic expression.

Introduction

Indian temple architecture represents a synthesis of religion, philosophy, aesthetics and artistic practice. Temples were not just merely the places of worship but also cultural centres where music, dance, drama and rituals were integrated into daily religious lifestyle. The *Natyaśāstra* provided a theoretical framework for these artistic expressions and significantly influenced temple iconography and sculptural programs.

The relationship between Indian performing arts and temple sculpture has long fascinated scholars of art history, archaeology and aesthetics. Sculptors drew inspiration from codified dance postures, gestures, and emotional expressions described in the *Natyaśāstra*,

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translating ephemeral movements into enduring visual forms on the walls of the temples. As a result, temple walls became repositories of aesthetic knowledge and visual manifestations of classical performance traditions.

Among the foundational texts of Indian artistic thought, the *Natyaśāstra* occupies a central place. Traditionally attributed to Bharata Muni, this monumental treatise on drama, dance, music, gesture, emotion and aesthetics profoundly shaped the artistic imagination of India. A significant scholarly question arises: Did ancient Indian sculptors consciously implement the principles of the *Natyaśāstra* while carving temple sculptures? The evidence from iconography, dance postures, hand gestures, emotional expressions and compositional arrangements strongly suggests that they might majorly did. This article argues that the *Natyaśāstra* was not merely a theatrical manual but an influential aesthetic framework that informed temple sculpture across different regions and periods of ancient India. Sculptors translated the text's codified gestures (*mudras*), body positions (*karanas* and *sthanas*), emotional states (*bhavas*), and aesthetic ideals (*rasa*) into stone, thereby creating temples that functioned as visual embodiments of sacred performance.

The Natyaśāstra: Scope, Artistic Vision and Theory of Aesthetic Representation

Composed between approximately the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, the *Natyaśāstra* is one of the world's earliest comprehensive treatises on performing arts. It discusses drama, dance, music, stagecraft, costume, makeup, architecture, and aesthetics. Particularly relevant to sculpture are its chapters on:

- Angika Abhinaya (expression through the body)
- Hasta Mudras (hand gestures)
- Karanas (coordinated dance movements)
- Sthanas (standing postures)
- Charis (leg movements)
- Bhavas and Rasas (emotions and aesthetic experience)

The treatise presents the human body as a disciplined medium of expression. Temple sculptors adopted this conception and transformed dynamic movement into enduring stone forms. As art historian Kapila Vatsyayan observed, Indian sculpture often captures "Movement Arrested in Eternity."¹

One of the central contributions of the *Natyaśāstra* is the theory of *rasa* (aesthetic experience) and *bhava* (emotional state). Bharata identifies eight primary rasas, including

Love (*śṛṅgāra*), Mirth(*hasa*), Grief(*karuna*), Anger(*raudra*), Heroism (*vīra*), Fear(*bhayanaka*), Disgust(*bibhatsa*), wonder(*adbhuta*), and tranquility (*śānta*) which was added later by other scholar. These emotional states were communicated through facial expressions, bodily postures, and gestures.

Temple sculptors adopted these principles to animate divine and human figures. The serene expressions of deities, the graceful movements of celestial dancers (*apsaras*), and the heroic stances of mythological warriors exemplify the visual embodiment of *rasa*. Through careful modeling of facial features and body language, sculptors created images capable of evoking emotional and spiritual responses similar to those sought in theatrical performances.

The Temple as a Theatre of the Sacred, Divine Presence, and the Cosmic Order

The *Natyaśāstra* regards performance as a sacred activity capable of reflecting cosmic truths. This idea is visually manifested in temple sculptures depicting divine dance, particularly the image of Shiva as Nataraja, the Lord of Dance. The dancing Shiva symbolizes creation, preservation, destruction, concealment, and grace—the fundamental processes of the universe.

Ancient Indian temples were not merely places of worship; they were centers of ritual, music, dance, and dramatic performance. The temple courtyard frequently served as a performance space, and dancing women (*devadasis*) were attached to many temples. Consequently, the sculptural decoration of temples naturally incorporated themes from dance and performance.

The integration of performance and architecture reflects a broader Indian aesthetic principle: the cosmos itself is viewed as divine performance (*lila*). Temple walls populated with dancers, musicians, actors, celestial beings and expressive deities visually enact this cosmic drama.

Temple sculptures portraying Shiva's dance often correspond to principles articulated in the *Natyaśāstra*. Dynamic body positions, expressive gestures, and rhythmic compositions embody the union of spiritual symbolism and artistic technique. Such representations suggest that dance was understood not merely as entertainment but as a metaphysical expression of cosmic order.

Evidence of Natyaśāstra in Temple Sculpture

1. Karanas and Dance Postures

Among the most direct influences of the *Natyaśāstra* on temple sculpture is the depiction of *karanas*. Bharata describes 108 *karanas*, which are coordinated movements involving the

body, limbs, postur, gestures and locomotion. These movements form the basis of classical Indian dance traditions.

Several temple complexes contain sculptural representations of these *karanas*. The temples of Brihadisvara Temple built by Rajaraja Chola I in the 11th century CE, Chidambaram Nataraja Temple, and Sarangapani Temple display numerous dance poses corresponding to Bharata's descriptions. Scholars have identified that these sculptural panels/carvings function not only as decorative elements but also as direct visual translations of Bharata's technical vocabulary of classical dance. For example, postures corresponding to Talapusaputa, Ardhamandala, and Bhujangatrasita can be recognized in temple reliefs.

The depiction of *karanas* demonstrates the sculptor's ability to capture movement in static form. Through balanced composition, rhythmic contours, and precise anatomical modeling, sculptors conveyed a sense of motion despite the immobility of stone.

2. Mudras (Hand Gestures)

The *Natyaśāstra* provides detailed classifications of hand gestures (*mudras* or *hastas*), which communicate emotions, actions, and symbolic meanings in performance. The *Natyaśāstra* codifies numerous hand gestures used to communicate meaning. Temple sculptors employed these mudras extensively in divine and human figures. Temple sculptures frequently incorporate these gestures in representations of deities, attendants, and dancers.

Common examples include:

Mudra	Meaning
Abhaya	Fearlessness, reassurance and protection
Varada	Boon-giving, benevolence
Katakamukha	Holding flowers or ornaments
Tripataka	Crown, tree, weapon, or divine power
Ardhachandra	Moon or graceful movement

These gestures appear consistently across temple iconography, indicating a shared aesthetic and symbolic language between theatrical performance and sculptural representation. These gestures appear repeatedly in sculptures from Khajuraho Group of Monuments, Konark Sun Temple, hoysala and Chola temples, demonstrating a shared gestural language rooted in classical performance traditions.³ The use of *mudras* enabled sculptors to communicate complex theological concepts without verbal narration, much as actors did on stage.

3. Tribhanga and Idealized Body Movement

The celebrated tribhanga posture—where the body bends at the neck, torso, and knee—embodies rhythmic movement and grace. Although discussed in sculptural treatises as well, its aesthetic affinity with dance described in the *Natyaśāstra* is unmistakable.

Figures of celestial dancers (apsaras), river goddesses, and female attendants across Indian temples display this posture. The sculptor's aim was not anatomical realism but rhythmic expressiveness, a principle central to Bharata's theory of performance.

4. Bhava and Rasa in Stone

The *Natyaśāstra*'s theory of rasa—esthetic relish experienced by the spectator—deeply influenced Indian art. Sculptors attempted to evoke emotional states through facial expression, posture, and narrative context.

Examples include:

- Shringara (love) in mithuna couples at Khajuraho.
- Vira (heroism) in warrior and deity sculptures.
- Raudra (fury) in fierce forms of Shiva and Durga.
- Shanta (tranquility) in meditative Buddha and Jain images.

Thus, temple sculpture became a visual counterpart to dramatic performance, aiming to generate aesthetic experience in the viewer.⁴

Sculptural Narratives and Dramatic Representation

The *Natyaśāstra* emphasizes storytelling through performance. Similarly, temple sculptures frequently narrate episodes from epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as various *Puranic* traditions. These narrative reliefs resemble dramatic scenes in which characters are shown interacting through gestures, expressions, and spatial arrangements.

The sculptural narratives of temples such as Khajuraho Group of Monuments and Konark Sun Temple demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of dramatic composition. Figures are arranged to create visual continuity, emotional intensity, and narrative progression, paralleling the dramaturgical principles prescribed in the *Natyaśāstra*.

Major Temple Traditions and *Natyaśāstra* Influence

A. Chola Temples (Tamil Nadu)



The Chola period offers the most explicit evidence of *Natyaśāstra* implementation. The Brihadisvara Temple contains sculpted dance movements closely corresponding to Bharata's *karanas*. Chola bronzes of Nataraja also embody rhythmic balance, controlled movement, and expressive gesture.

Art historian C. Sivaramamurti argued that Chola artists possessed sophisticated knowledge of classical dance theory and consciously integrated it into sculpture.⁵

B. Khajuraho Temples (Madhya Pradesh)



The Chandela temples of Khajuraho are renowned for their dynamic figures. Hundreds of dancing surasundaris display complex body movements, expressive gestures, and dramatic attitudes that closely resemble descriptions in the *Natyaśāstra*.

These sculptures convey not static beauty alone but kinetic rhythm, suggesting that the sculptors observed living dance traditions informed by classical theory.

C. Konark Sun Temple (Odisha)



The 13th-century Konark Sun Temple contains extensive depictions of dancers and musicians. Odissi dance scholars have identified many poses that correspond to classical movement patterns described in Sanskrit treatises.

The temple's sculptural program effectively functions as a stone archive of medieval Indian performance culture.⁶

D. Hoysala Temples (Karnataka)



The temples of Chennakesava Temple and Hoysaleswara Temple feature exquisitely carved madanikas (celestial maidens). Many hold musical instruments or dance in elegant postures, demonstrating refined knowledge of gesture and bodily rhythm.

These figures are often interpreted as visual embodiments of *lasya*, the graceful feminine mode of dance discussed in classical texts.

How Sculptors May Have Learned *Natyaśāstra* Principles

The transmission of artistic knowledge in ancient India was primarily through guilds and hereditary workshops. Sculptors were unlikely to rely solely on direct textual reading. Instead, they absorbed concepts through:

- Temple dance traditions.
- Oral instruction.
- Architectural and sculptural manuals (*Shilpashastras*).
- Interaction with dancers, musicians, and ritual specialists.
- Workshop pattern books and established iconographic conventions.

Texts such as the *Manasara* and *Shilpa Ratna* often integrate ideas compatible with the *Natyaśāstra*, indicating a shared artistic vocabulary.

Limitations and Scholarly Debate

Some scholars caution against claiming that every temple sculpture was directly copied from the *Natyaśāstra*. Indian art drew from multiple textual and regional traditions, including:

- *Shilpashastras*
- *Agamas*
- *Puranas*
- Local dance practices
- Royal patronage
- Regional aesthetic preferences

Therefore, it is more accurate to say that the *Natyaśāstra* provided a major aesthetic and performative framework rather than being the sole source for temple sculpture.

Conclusion

The influence of the *Natyaśāstra* on ancient Indian temple sculpture reveals the interconnected nature of Indian artistic traditions. Concepts such as *rasa*, *bhava*, *karana* and *mudra* transcended the boundaries of theatrical performance and became integral to the visual language of temple art. Through the translation of movement, emotion and symbolism into stone, sculptors transformed temples into dynamic cultural texts that preserved and communicated aesthetic knowledge across generations.

The evidence from dance postures, *mudras*, expressive gestures, body bends, emotional representation, and narrative composition demonstrates that the principles of the

Natyaśāstra significantly influenced the sculptural programs of ancient Indian temples. In many cases—especially in Chola, Khajuraho, Konark, and Hoysala temples—the connection is too systematic to be accidental.

Ancient sculptors transformed Bharata's theory of performance into a visual language of stone. The temple thus became a permanent theatre where divine dance, human emotion, music, and cosmic rhythm were eternally enacted. Through this synthesis, Indian civilization achieved one of its greatest artistic accomplishments: the fusion of architecture, sculpture, dance, drama and spirituality into a single aesthetic experience.

Hence, the study of temple sculpture through the lens of the *Natyaśāstra* demonstrates that ancient Indian art was guided by a coherent theoretical framework linking architecture, sculpture, dance, drama and spirituality. Consequently, temple sculptures should be understood not merely as decorative elements but as enduring embodiments of classical Indian aesthetic philosophy, knowledge and performative traditions.

Footnotes/Endnotes

- Kapila Vatsyayan, *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts* (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1968), p. 12.
- C. Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1974), pp. 85–92.
- Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva* (New York: Noonday Press, 1957), pp. 56–63.
- V. Raghavan, *The Number of Rasas* (Madras: Adyar Library, 1975), pp. 21–30.
- C. Sivaramamurti, *South Indian Bronzes* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1963), pp. 44–51.
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