Natya Shastra

The *Natya Śāstra* (Sanskrit: नाट्य शास्त्र, Nāṭyaśāstra) is a Sanskrit Hindu text on the performing arts. The text is attributed to sage Bharata Muni, and its first complete compilation is dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary between 500 BCE and 500 CE.

The text consists of 36 chapters with a cumulative total of 6000 poetic verses describing performance arts. The subjects covered by the treatise include dramatic composition, structure of a play and the construction of a stage to host it, genres of acting, body movements, make up and costumes, role and goals of an art director, the musical scales, musical instruments and the integration of music with art performance.

The *Nāṭya Śāstra* is notable as an ancient encyclopedic treatise on the arts, one which has influenced dance, music and literary traditions in India. It is also notable for its aesthetic "Rasa" theory, which asserts that entertainment is a desired effect of performance arts but not the primary goal, and that the primary goal is to transport the individual in the audience into another parallel reality, full of wonder, where he experiences the essence of his own consciousness, and reflects on spiritual and moral questions.

The text has inspired secondary literature such as Sanskrit bhasya (reviews and commentaries) such as by the 10th century Abhinavagupta.

The author of the text is unknown, and the Hindu tradition attributes it to the Rishi (sage) Bharata. It may be the work of several authors, but scholars disagree. Bharat Gupt states that the text stylistically shows characteristics of a single compiler in the existing version, a view shared by Kapila Vatsayan.

The title of the text is composed of two words, "Nāṭya" and "Śāstra". The root of the Sanskrit word *Nāṭya* is Nat (नाट) which means "act, represent". The word *Śāstra* (शास्त्र) means "precept, rules, manual, compendium, book or treatise", and is generally used as a suffix in the Indian literature context, for knowledge in a defined area of practice.

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**Etymology**

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**Date and author**

The composition date of *Natyashastra* is unknown, estimates vary between 500 BCE to 500 CE. The text may have started in the 1st millennium BCE, expanded over time, and most scholars suggest, based on mention of this text in other Indian literature, that the first complete version of the text was likely finished between 200 BCE to 200 CE. The *Natya Shastra* is traditionally alleged to be linked to a 36,000 verse Vedic composition called Adibharata, however there is no corroborating evidence that such a text ever existed.

The text has survived into the modern age in several manuscript versions, wherein the title of the chapters vary and in some cases the content of the few chapters differ. Some recensions show significant interpolations and corruption of the text along with internal contradictions and sudden changes in style. Scholars such as PV Kane state that the text was likely changed as well as added to the original between the 3rd to 8th century CE, thus creating some variant editions, and the mixture of poetic verses and prose in a few extant manuscripts of *Natyasastra* may be because of this.

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The *Agni Purana*, a generic encyclopedia, includes chapters on dramatic arts and includes external links.
Historical roots

The Natyashastra is the oldest surviving ancient Indian work on performance arts. The roots of the text extend at least as far back as the Natasutras, dated to around the mid 1st millennium BCE. The Natyashastra refers to drama performers as Shālālīnīs, likely because they were so known at the time the text was written, a name derived from the legacy of the Vedic sage Śālālinī credited with Natasutras. Richmond et al estimate the Natyashastra to have been composed around 600 BCE.

According to Lewis Rowell, a professor of Music specializing on classical Indian music, the earliest Indian artistic thought included three arts, syllabic recital (vādyya), melos (gīta) and dance (nrtta), as well as two musical genres, Gandharva (formal, composed, ceremonial music) and Gana (informal, improvised, entertainment music). The Gandharva subgenre also implied celestial, divine associations, while the Gana was free form art and included singing. The Sanskrit musical tradition spread widely in the Indian subcontinent during the late 1st millennium BCE, and the ancient Tamil classics make it “abundantly clear that a cultivated musical tradition existed in South India as early as the last few pre-Christian centuries”.

The art schools of Shālālinī and Krishashāva, mentioned in both the Brahmanas and the Kalpasutras and Srautasutras may have been associated with the performance of vedic rituals, which involved storytelling with embedded ethical values. The Vedanga texts such as verse 1.4.29 of Panini Sutras mention these as well. The roots of the Natyashastra thus likely trace to the more ancient vedic traditions of integrating ritual recitation, dialogue and song in a dramatic representation of spiritual themes. The Sanskrit verses in chapter 13.2 of Shatapatha Brahmana (~800–700 BCE), for example, are written in the form of a riddle play between two actors.

The Vedic sacrifice (yajna) is presented as a kind of drama, with its actors, its dialogues, its portion to be set to music, its interludes, and its climaxes.

— Louis Renou, Vedic Indic

Structure

The most studied version of the text, consisting of about 6000 poetic verses, is structured into 36 chapters. The tradition believes that the text originally had 12,000 verses. Somewhat different versions of the manuscripts exist, and these contain 37 or 38 chapters. Predominant number of its verses are in precise Anustubh meter (4x8, or exactly 32 syllables in every shloka), some verses are in Arya meter (a morae-based Sanskrit meter), and the text has some text that is in prose particularly in chapters 6, 7 and 28.

The structure of the text harmoniously compiles aspects of the theatrical arts into separate chapters. The text opens with the mythical genesis and history of drama, mentions the role of Hindu deities in various aspects of the arts, and the recommended Puja (consecration ceremony) of a stage for performance arts. The text, states Natalia Lidova, then describes the theory of Tāṭālāya dance (Shiva), the theory of rasa, of bhāva, expression, gestures, acting techniques, basic steps, standing postures.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the “Rasa” theory on aesthetics in performance arts, while chapters 8 to 13 are dedicated to the art of acting. Stage instruments such as methods for holding accessories, weapons, relative movement of actors and actresses, scene formulation, stage zones, conventions and customs are included in chapters 10 to 13 of the Natyashastra. The chapters 14 to 20 are dedicated to plot and structure of underlying text behind the performance art. These sections include the theory of Sanskrit prosody, musical meters and the language of expression. Chapter 17 presents the attributes of poetry and figures of speech, while chapter 18 presents the art of speech and delivery in the performance arts. The text lists ten kinds of play, presents its theory of plot, costumes, and make-up. The text dedicates several chapters exclusively to women in performance arts, with chapter 24 on female theater. The training of actors is presented in chapters 26 and 35 of the text.

The theory of music, techniques for singing, and music instruments are discussed over chapters 28 to 31. The root of music, which follow the Natyashastra format, but enumerates more styles and types of performance arts, which states Winternitz, may reflect an expansion in studies of the arts by the time Agni Purana was composed.
Contents

The contents of the Natyasastra, states Susan Schwartz, are "in part theatrical manual, part philosophy of aesthetics, part mythological history, part theology." It is the oldest surviving treatise on dramaturgy from India, with sections on the theory and practice of various performance arts. The text extends its reach into asking and understanding the goals of performance arts, the nature of the playwright, the artists and the spectators, their intimate relationship during the performance, Natya topics as envisioned in this text includes what in western performing arts would include drama, dance, theatre, poetry and music. The text integrates its aesthetics, axiology and description of arts with mythologies associated with Hindu Devas and Devis.

Performance arts, states Natyashastra, are a form of Vedic ritual ceremony (yajna). Performance arts aim to empower man to experience this rasa, or re-experience it. Actors aim to journey the spectator to this aesthetic experience within him. Rasa is prepared, states Natya Shastra, through a creative synthesis and expression of vibhava (determinants), anubhava (consequents) and vyabhischaribhava (transitory states). In the process of emotionally engaging the individual in the audience, the text outlines the use of eight sentiments – erotic, comic, pathetic, terrible, furious, odious, heroic and marvellous.

The text discusses a variety of performance arts as well as the design of the stage.

Drama

The Natyashastra defines drama in verse 6.10 as that which aesthetically arouses joy in the spectator, through the medium of actor’s art of communication, that helps connect and transport the individual into a super sensual inner state of being. The Natya connects through abhinaya, that is applying body-speech-mind and scene, wherein asserts Natyashastra, the actors use two practices of dharmi (performance), in four styles and four regional variations, accompanied by song and music in a playhouse carefully designed to achieve siddhi (success in production). Drama in this ancient Sanskrit text, thus is an art to engage every aspect of life, in order to glorify and gift a state of joyful consciousness.

The text discusses the universal and inner principles of drama, that it asserts successfully affects and journeys the audience to a supersensual state of discovery and understanding. The stories and plots were provided by the Itihasas (epics), the Puranas and the Kathas genre of Hindu literature.

The text states that the playwright should know the bhavas (inner state of being) of all characters in the story, and it is these bhavas that the audience of that drama connects with. The hero is shown to have siddhi, that is applying bhavas to the performance. Combined with an epic story, the text extends its reach into asking and understanding the goals of performance arts, the nature of the playwright, the artists and the spectators, their intimate relationship during the performance, Natya topics as envisioned in this text includes what in western performing arts would include drama, dance, theatre, poetry and music. The text integrates its aesthetics, axiology and description of arts with mythologies associated with Hindu Devas and Devis.

Performance arts and culture

Let Nātya (drama and dance) be the fifth vedic scripture. Combined with an epic story, it must contain the significance of every scripture, and forward every art.

— Natyashastra 1.14–15

The Natyasastra discusses dance and many other performance arts.

Dramatic arts

[Natyashastra praises dramatic arts] as a comprehensive aid to the learning of virtue, proper behavior, ethical and moral fortitude, courage, love and adoration of the divine.

— Susan L. Schwartz

Examples of classical dance arts
The text goes into specifics to explain the means available within dramatic arts to achieve its goals. Just like the taste of food, states *Natyashastra*, is determined by combination of vegetables, spices and other articles such as sugar and salt, the audience tastes dominant states of a drama through expression of words, gestures and temperaments. These dominant states are love, mirth, sorrow, anger, energy, terror, disgust and astonishment. Further, states the text, there are 33 psychological states which are transitory such as discouragement, weakness, apprehension, intoxication, tiredness, anxiety, agitation, despair, impatience. There are eight temperamental states that a drama can deploy to carry its message. The text describes four means of communication between the actors and the audience – words, gestures, dresses and *aharya* (make ups, cosmetics), all of which should be harmonious with the temperament envisioned in the drama. The text discusses the dominant, transitory and temperamental states, for dramatic arts, and the means that an artist can use to express these states, in chapters 6 through 7.

The *Natyashastra* describes the stage for performance arts as the sacred space for artists, and discusses the specifics of stage design, positioning the actors, the relative locations, movement on stage, entrance and exit, change in background, transition, objects displayed on the stage, and such architectural features of a theatre; the text asserts that these aspects help the audience get absorbed in the drama as well as understand the message and the meaning being communicated. After the 10th-century, Hindu temples were designed to include stages for performance arts (for example, *kuttampalams*), or prayer halls (for example, *namghar*) that seconded as dramatic arts stage, based on the square principle described in the *Natyashastra*, such as those in the peninsular and eastern states of India.

**Song and dance in arts**

The *Natyashastra* discusses Vedic songs, and also dedicates over 130 verses to non-Vedic songs. Chapter 17 of the text is entirely dedicated to poetry and the structure of a song, which it states is also the template for composing plays. Its chapter 31 asserts that there are seven types of songs, and these are *Mandraka*, *Aparantaka*, *Rovindaka*, *Prakari*, *Ullopyaka*, *Ovedaka* and *Uttara*. It also elaborates on 33 melodic alankaras in songs. These are melodic tools of art for any song, and they are essential. Without these melodic intonations, states the text, a song becomes like "a night without the moon, a river without water, a creeper with a flower and a woman without an ornament". A song also has four basic architectural *varna* to empower its meaning, and these tone patterns are ascending line, steady line, descending line and the unsteady line.

The ideal poem produces bliss in the reader, or listener. It transports the audience into an imaginative world, transforms his inner state, and delivers him to a higher level of consciousness, suggests *Natyashastra*. Great songs do not instruct or lecture, they delight and liberate from within to a state of godlike ecstasy. According to Susan Schwartz, these sentiments and ideas of *Natyashastra* likely influenced the devotional songs and musical trends of the Bhakti movement that emerged in Hinduism during the second half of the 1st millennium CE.

Indian dance (nritta, *पृथि*) traditions, states Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, have roots in the aesthetics of *Natyashastra*. The text defines the basic dance unit to be a *kuruna*, which is a specific combination of the hands and feet integrated with specific body posture and gait (*sthana* and *chari* respectively). Chapter 4 describes 108 *karanas* as the building blocks to the art of dance. The text states the various movements of major and minor limbs with facial states as means of articulating ideas and expressing emotions.

**Music and musical instruments**

The *Natyashastra* is, states Emmie Te Nijenhuis, the oldest surviving text that systematically treats "the theory and instruments of Indian music". Music has been an integral part of performance arts in the Hindu tradition since its Vedic times and the theories of music found in the *Natyashastra* are also found in many Puranas, such as the Markandeya Purana.

The ancient Indian tradition, before the *Natyashastra* was finalized, classified musical instruments into four groups based on their acoustic principle (how they work, rather than the material they are made of). The *Natyashastra* accepts these four categories as given, and dedicates four separate chapters to them, one each on stringed instruments (chordophones), hollow instruments (aerophones), solid instruments (idiophones), and covered instruments (membranophones).

Chapters 15 and 16 of the text discuss Sanskrit prosody in a manner similar to those found in more ancient Vedanga texts such as the *Pingala Sutras*. Chapters 28 through 34 are dedicated to music, both vocal and instrument based. Chapter 28, discusses the harmonic scale, calling the unit of tonal measurement or audible unit as *Sruti* with verse 28.21 introducing the musical scale as follows.
The music theory in the *Natyashastra*, states Maurice Winternitz, centers around three themes – sound, rhythm and prosody applied to musical texts.[100] The text asserts that the octave has 22 *srutis* or microintervals of musical tones or 1200 cents.[94] This is very close to the ancient Greek system, states Emmie Te Nijenhuis, with the difference that each *sruti* computes to 54.5 cents, while the Greek enharmonic quartertone system computes to 55 cents.[94] The text discusses *gramas* (scales) and *murchanas* (modes), mentioning three scales of seven modes (21 total), some of which are the same as the Greek modes.[101] However, the Gandhara-grama is just mentioned in *Natyashastra*, while its discussion largely focuses on two scales, fourteen modes and eight four *tanás* (notes).[102][103][104] The text also discusses which scales are best for different forms of performance arts,[101]

The *Natyashastra* describes from chapter 28 onwards, four types of regular musical instruments, grouping them as stringed giving the example of veena, covered giving the example of drums, solid giving the example of cymbals, and hollow stating flutes as example.[89] Chapter 33 asserts team performance, calling it *kutapa* (orchestra) which it states to have one male and one female singer with nine to eleven musical instruments accompanied by players.[89]

**Male and female actors**

The *Natyashastra* enshrines the male and female actors in any performance art to be the most important.[105] The brightness of performance, or its lack, impacts everything; a great play that is not performed becomes beautiful to the audience when brilliantly performed, states *Natyashastra*.[105] A performance art of any form needs auditors and director, states the text, whose role is to work together with the actors from the perspective of the audience and the significance or meaning the playwright of the art work is attempting to convey.[106]

The text dedicates significant number of verses on actor training, as did the Indian dramaturgy literature that arose in its wake.[108][109] The ideal actor training, states *Natyashastra*, encourages self development within the actor and raises the actor’s level of consciousness, which in turn empowers him or her to express ideas from that higher state of consciousness.[108][110] Acting is more than physical techniques or rote recitation, it is communication through emotions and expression of embedded meaning and levels of consciousness in the underlying text.[108][109]

The actor, states the text, should understand the three Guṇas, that is *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* qualities, because human lives are an interplay of these.[111][108][112] The actor must feel a specific state within, to express it without. Thus, states Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, the guidelines in *Natyashastra* employ the ideas in Yoga school of Hindu philosophy, with concepts mirroring asanas, pranayama and dhyana, both for actor training and the expression of higher levels of consciousness.[108]

Specific training on gestures and movements for actors, their performance and significance, are discussed in chapters 8 through 12 of the *Natyashastra*. Chapter 24 is dedicated to females in performance arts, however other chapters on actor training include numerous verses that mention women along with men.[115][3][48]

**The goals of art: spiritual values**

The *Natyashastra* and other ancient Hindu texts such as the Yajnavalkya Smriti assert that arts and music are spiritual, with the power to guide one to moksha, through empowering the concentration of mind for the liberation of the Self (soul, Atman). These arts are offered as alternate paths (*marga* or yoga), in strength similar to the knowledge of the *Srutis* (Vedas and Upanishads).[75] Various medieval scholars, such as the 12th-century Mitaksara and Apararka, cite *Natyashastra* and Bharata in linking arts to spirituality, while the text itself asserts that beautiful songs are sacred and performance arts are holy.[75]
The Natyashastra influenced other arts in ancient and medieval India. The dancing Shiva sculpture in Badami cave temples (6th–7th century CE), for example, illustrates its dance movements and Lalatatilakam pose.

When is a play successful?

Drishtaphala [visible fruits] like banners or material rewards do not indicate success of a play production.

Real success is achieved when the play is performed with skilled precision, devoted faith and pure concentration. To succeed, the artist must immerse the spectator with pure joy of rasa experience.

The spectator's concentrated absorption and appreciation is success.

— Abhinavagupta on Natyasastra (Abridged)  
Trans: Tarla Mehta

Influence

The first chapter of the text declares that the text’s origins came after the four Vedas had been established, and yet there was lust, covetousness, wrath and jealousy among human beings. The text was written as a fifth Veda, so that the essence of the Vedas can be heard and viewed, in Natya form to encourage every member of the society to dharma, artha and kama. The text originated to enable arts that influence the society and encourage each individual to consider good counsel, to explain sciences and demonstrate arts and crafts widely. The text is a guide and progeny of what is in the Vedas, asserts the Natyashastra. The text re-asserts a similar message in the closing chapter, stating for example, in verses 36.20–21 that performance arts such as drama, songs, music, and dance with music are equal in importance to the exposition of the Vedic hymns, and that participating in vocal or instrumental music once is superior to bathing in river Ganges for a thousand days.

Nāyaśāstra, states Natalia Lidova, has been far more than “a mere compendium on drama”. It provided the foundation of theatrical and literary works that followed, which shaped the post-Vedic culture. It has been an important source book of Hindu performance arts and its cultural beliefs regarding the role of arts in the social (dharmic) as well as the personal inner life of man in Hinduism. The Natyashastra text has been influential in other arts. The 108 dance forms described in the Natyashastra, for example, have inspired Shiva sculptures of the 1st-millennium BCE, particularly the Tandava style which fuses many of these into a composite image found at the Nataraja temple of Chidambaram. The movements of dance and expression in the Natyashastra are found carved on the pillars, walls and gateways of 1st-millennium Hindu temples. The specifications provided in the Natyashastra can be found in the depiction of arts in sculpture, in icons and friezes across India.

[In Indian arts] the imagery of the Upanishads and the elaborate ritual of the Brahmanas is the ground plan for each of the arts, be it architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance or drama. The artist repeats and chisels this imagery by giving it concrete shape through stone, sound, line or movement.

— Kapila Vatsyayan, The Square and the Circle of the Indian Arts

The Rasa theory of Natyashastra has attracted scholarly interest in communication studies for its insights into developing texts and performances outside the Indian culture.
Dance in India

Raga – melodic mode

Rasa – aesthetics in performance arts

Sangita Ratnakara – one of the most important medieval era Sanskrit text on music and dance

Tala (music) – musical meter, beat

References


2. Gay L. Beck (2012). *Sonic Liturgy: Ritual and Music in Hindu Tradition*. University of South Carolina Press. pp. 138–139. ISBN 978-0-8133-4666-3. "Quote: A summation of the signal importance of the Natyasatra for Hindu religion and culture has been provided by Susan Schwartz, ‘In short, the Natyasatra is an exhaustive encyclopedic dissertation of the arts, with an emphasis on performing arts as its central feature. It is also full of innovations to deities, acknowledging the divine origins of the arts and the central role of performance arts in achieving divine goals (…).’"


15. Coomaraswamy and Duggirala (1917). "The Mirror of Gesture", Harvard University Press. p. 4; Also see chapter 36


The concept of beauty in Indian tradition is, therefore, conceived and presented as the experience of delight at a higher level of consciousness."


68. Gosh 2002, pp. 102, note the text lists all 33.


77. Pandurang Vaman Kane 1971, p. 46.


100. Emmie Te Nijenhuis 1974, pp. 10–21.


Nītīsākapālakrūpam, Māni Mādāhu Chākyār (1975), Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi

Dramatic Concepts: Greek and Indian, Bharat Gupta (2014), DK Printworld, Delhi

### External links

- Natya-shastra full English translation by Manomohan Ghosh. Including additional footnotes and commentary extracts
- Natya sastra Manuscript (with 37 chapters), in Sanskrit
- Natya Shastra with Commentary of Abhinavagupta. 10th-century commentary, Compiled by M Ramakrishna Kavi, in Sanskrit
- Theatre layout with diagrams according to Natyasasatra, Prachi Shah, Bhartiya Drama

### Dance in India

#### Classical

- Bharata Natyam
- Kathak
- Kathakali
- Kuchipudi
- Manipuri
- Mohiniyattam
- Odissi
- Sattriya

#### Divine forms

- Nataraja
- Tandava
- Rasa lila
- Lasya
The Natya Shastra is incredibly wide in its scope. While it primarily deals with stagecraft, it has come to influence music, classical Indian dance, and literature as well. It covers stage design, music, dance, makeup, and virtually every other aspect of stagecraft. It is very important to the history of Indian classical music because it is the only text which gives such detail about the music and instruments of the period. Thus, an argument can be made that the Natya Shastra is the foundation of the fine arts in India. Natyashastra: Natyashastra, detailed treatise and handbook on dramatic art that deals with all aspects of classical Sanskrit theatre. It is believed to have been written by the mythic Brahman sage and priest Bharata (1st century BCE–3rd century CE). Its many chapters contain detailed treatments of all the Natya Shastra Lite. This features only introduction Chapters. Natya Shastra, is a Sanskrit work on drama, performing arts, theater, dance, music and various other topics. The word natyashastra also refers to a global category of literature encompassing this ancient Indian tradition of dramatic performance. The authorship of this work dates back to as far as at least the 1st millennium BCE.