

Evolution of Indian Classical Dance: A Natyasastra-Based Perspective on Transformation and Continuity

Ms Priya Majumder

Ph.D Scholar, Sanskrit Discipline,
School of Humanities, IGNOU
Email: priyamajumder.2k17@gmail.com

Dr. Soniya

Assistant Professor, Sanskrit Discipline,
School of Humanities, IGNOU
Email: soniya85@ignou.ac.in

Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of Indian classical dance through the lens of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, highlighting the interplay between continuity and transformation across centuries. As the foundational treatise on Indian dramaturgy, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides a codified framework of aesthetics, technique, and philosophy—particularly the principles of *rasa*, *bhāva*, *nṛtta*, and *nṛtya*—that continue to shape Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, and Manipuri. The study traces these forms from sacred temple rituals and royal court performances to modern proscenium stages, analyzing historical shifts such as colonial decline and 20th-century revival movements, as well as regional adaptations that reflect local cultural sensibilities. It also addresses contemporary innovations, including the integration of global movement vocabularies, digital technologies, interdisciplinary collaborations, and engagement with socio-political and gender discourses. The paper concludes that Indian classical dance is a living tradition, where transformation and continuity coexist, allowing the art form to remain historically grounded yet dynamically adaptive.

Keywords: Natyashastra, Indian Classical Dance Evolution, Dance and Cultural Transformation, Expressive Theory of Nritya, Cultural Aesthetics, Tradition and Innovation in Dance.

Introduction:

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharata is the earliest known and most comprehensive treatise on Indian dance, providing a theoretical and practical framework that has profoundly influenced all subsequent works on the subject (Bharata, 1961; Vatsyayan, 1996). Every later treatise, manual, or commentary on dance demonstrates significant reliance on its principles, attesting to its enduring impact. This lasting influence stems from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s unique integration of both theoretical exposition and practical instruction: it not only details dance techniques but also establishes fundamental concepts—such as the system of *rasas*, *bhavas*, and expressive gestures—that remain central to scholarly and performative discussions of the art form.

To fully understand these concepts, it is necessary to appreciate Bharata's holistic perspective on drama, dance, and music, as well as their role in society. Bharata conceptualized drama as the fifth Veda, a sacred text created by Brahma to provide both knowledge and entertainment to those who were not permitted to study the four traditional Vedas:

न वेदव्यवहारोऽयं संश्राव्यः शूद्रजातषु ।
तस्मात् सृजापरं वेदं पञ्चमं सार्ववर्णिकम् ॥

एवमस्त्विति तानुक्त्वा देवराजं वसृज्य च ।

सम्मार चतुरो वेदान् योगमास्थाय तत्त्ववत्ति ॥¹

In this vision, dance, which Bharata refers to primarily as *nṛtta*, is initially conceived as a non-representational art form. *Nṛtta* functions to enhance the aesthetic appeal of a performance through rhythm, movement, and technical virtuosity, rather than to convey narrative meaning. It serves as an embellishment to drama, heightening the sensory and emotional experience of the audience without necessarily carrying explicit representational content.

However, subsequent texts and commentaries reveal a more intricate understanding of dance, distinguishing *nṛtya* as the representational or expressive aspect. In this expanded conceptualization, dance is not merely an accessory to drama but emerges as a parallel, autonomous art form capable of conveying narrative, emotion, and character through structured movements and abhinaya. The recognition of *nṛtya* highlights the complementarity of dance and acting techniques within performance: as dance evolved, *nṛtya* developed dynamically, incorporating sophisticated gestures, expressions, and mimetic conventions to communicate meaning effectively. Dance manuals from various periods reflect this transformation, emphasizing expressive depth and the widening scope of dance to encompass narrative, emotional, and symbolic functions.

Over the centuries, classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, and Kathakali have evolved within the theoretical and aesthetic framework established by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Each form demonstrates a distinct regional identity, yet all remain anchored in its principles of rhythm, expression, and aesthetics. The evolution of these forms has been influenced by multiple factors, including religious rituals, royal patronage, sociopolitical change, colonial interventions, and modern revivalist movements. As these dance traditions transitioned from sacred temple spaces and royal courts to contemporary proscenium stages, they adapted to new performance contexts while retaining their foundational ethos.

This paper examines how Indian classical dance has transformed in response to historical, cultural, and technological shifts while maintaining its connection to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. It investigates the interplay of continuity and change, demonstrating how classical dance is both a repository of ancient aesthetic wisdom and a living, adaptive art form capable of engaging with modern sensibilities. By situating contemporary innovations—such as the integration of global movement vocabularies, digital technologies, interdisciplinary collaborations, and

¹ Nāṭyaśāstra 1. 12-13

engagement with socio-political narratives—within the framework of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, this study underscores the enduring relevance of classical principles. Ultimately, the paper argues that Indian classical dance exemplifies a tradition in which transformation and continuity are complementary forces, enabling the art form to renew itself while honoring its classical roots.

The Natyashastra and Its Influence on Classical Dance

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* establishes the theoretical and practical foundations of Indian classical dance by articulating its purpose, constituent elements, and techniques. Bharata's treatise systematically codifies the art form, integrating movement, rhythm, expression, and aesthetics into a cohesive framework. Central to this framework are the concepts of **eight rasas** (emotions) and **thirty-three bhavas** (emotional states), which serve as the basis for expressive storytelling and audience engagement (Vatsyayan, 1977). The text further prescribes detailed movement patterns, including **karanas** (basic units of movement) and **angaharas** (combinations of karanas), which have been adapted and interpreted across different classical dance styles. This integration of theory and practice provides a structured vocabulary for both technical execution and expressive communication, ensuring that each dance form aligns with the underlying aesthetic and philosophical principles of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

Historical Evolution of Indian Classical Dance

1. Temple and Ritualistic Traditions

In its earliest phases, Indian classical dance was intimately connected with religious practice and temple rituals. In South India, **Bharatanatyam** was performed by Devadasis as a devotional offering to deities, emphasizing rhythm, precision, and spiritual expression (Soneji, 2012). Similarly, **Odissi** developed within the Jagannath temples of Odisha, performed by Maharis who combined sculptural postures, rhythmic patterns, and expressive gestures to narrate sacred stories. These ritualistic traditions reinforced the intrinsic connection between movement, devotion, and community participation, embedding dance within the socio-religious fabric of the region.

2. Royal Patronage and Court Performances

During the medieval period, classical dance expanded beyond temples into royal courts, evolving in response to changing patronage and cultural influences. **Kathak** emerged as a narrative dance form under the Mughal courts, incorporating Persian and Central Asian elements, such as intricate spins, delicate footwork, and poetic storytelling in Urdu. Similarly, **Kuchipudi**, originally performed by male Brahmins in religious settings, gradually adapted to include female performers, integrating theatrical elements and dynamic storytelling techniques. These developments illustrate the flexibility of classical dance forms, which were able to absorb external influences while retaining alignment with the theoretical principles of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

3. Colonial Suppression and 20th-Century Revival

The colonial period witnessed a decline in classical dance, primarily due to the suppression of temple practices and social stigmas associated with Devadasi traditions. However, the early

twentieth century saw a significant revival, spearheaded by pioneers such as **Rukmini Devi Arundale**, who restructured Bharatanatyam for the modern stage, emphasizing both its aesthetic and cultural value (Devi, 1984; Gaston, 1996). Parallel revival efforts were undertaken for **Odissi, Kathak, and Kuchipudi**, emphasizing codification, institutionalization, and performance pedagogy. These initiatives ensured the survival and modernization of classical dance, enabling it to reclaim a prominent place within Indian cultural identity and contemporary performing arts.

Regional Adaptations and Stylistic Transformations

Each classical dance form has evolved to reflect regional aesthetics while adhering to the principles of the Natyashastra:

- **Bharatanatyam**: Originally a temple dance, Bharatanatyam transitioned into a stage art with structured performances, thematic innovations, and contemporary choreographic interpretations.
- **Kathak**: From temple storytelling to Mughal court dance, Kathak integrated elements such as intricate footwork, spins, and Urdu poetry, balancing Natyashastra's principles with Persian influences.
- **Odissi**: Reconstructed in the 20th century, Odissi incorporates sculptural postures (tribhanga), deeply rooted in temple traditions and texts like the Abhinaya Darpana.
- **Kathakali** and Mohiniyattam: Rooted in Kerala, these forms emphasize dramatic storytelling, elaborate costumes, and theatrical expressions, drawing from both the Natyashastra and regional traditions.
- **Mohiniyattam**: Also hailing from Kerala, Mohiniyattam is characterized by its graceful, swaying movements and gentle expressions. Traditionally performed by women, it blends lasya elements with regional influences and Sanskrit texts. Drawing from the Natyashastra and local temple arts, Mohiniyattam conveys feminine elegance and devotional emotion with subtlety.
- **Kuchipudi**: Emerging from Andhra Pradesh, Kuchipudi began as a dance-drama tradition performed by male Brahmins. Over time, it embraced solo female performers and theatrical storytelling infused with dance. While maintaining nritta, nritya, and natya elements as outlined in the Natyashastra, it incorporates spoken dialogues, quicksilver footwork, and dramatic expressions, offering a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation.
- **Manipuri**: Originating from the northeastern state of Manipur, this dance form is deeply devotional and often associated with Vaishnavism. Unlike other forms, Manipuri emphasizes gentle, flowing movements and restrained expressions. Inspired by local rituals, dance-dramas like the Ras Lila, and guided by Natyashastra-based aesthetics, it offers a unique blend of serenity and spiritual depth.

Contemporary Transformations and Innovations in Classical Dance:

Indian classical dance continues to evolve in the modern era, not as a departure from tradition, but as a dynamic dialogue between ancient aesthetics and contemporary realities. While firmly rooted in the principles of the Nāṭyaśāstra, classical dance forms have embraced

innovation, enabling them to resonate with modern audiences and engage with global cultural contexts. This ongoing evolution highlights the adaptability of classical dance while maintaining its philosophical and aesthetic foundations.

1. Fusion with Modern and Global Dance Forms

Classical dance has increasingly intersected with global movement vocabularies, including ballet, modern dance, jazz, and even street dance forms. These cross-cultural collaborations have given rise to experimental choreographies that explore novel spatial dynamics, body language, rhythm, and narrative structures, while preserving the emotive and philosophical core of Indian classical aesthetics (Sarabhai, 2020). Such fusion allows artists to reach wider audiences, foster intercultural dialogue, and demonstrate the universality of expressive movement.

2. Use of Technology and Digital Media

The digital revolution has transformed both the dissemination and reception of classical dance. Online platforms now host performances, lecture-demonstrations, and interactive workshops, expanding access beyond geographical and institutional boundaries. Innovative technologies—such as augmented reality, projection mapping, and multimedia stage backdrops—enhance live performances, creating immersive and multi-sensory experiences. Additionally, the digitization of archival manuscripts, recordings, and choreographies plays a critical role in preserving classical knowledge and ensuring its availability for scholarly and pedagogical purposes.

3. Engagement with Social and Political Narratives

Contemporary practitioners increasingly use classical dance as a medium for advocacy and socio-political commentary. Performances address pressing issues such as gender equality, caste discrimination, ecological concerns, and human rights, extending the communicative potential of abhinaya to modern discourses (Chakravorty, 2008). By integrating these themes while adhering to the structural integrity of the Nāṭyaśāstra, dancers demonstrate the enduring relevance of classical forms as tools for cultural reflection and social critique.

4. Reinterpretation of Myth and Tradition

Modern choreographers frequently revisit classical mythology, offering fresh interpretations through feminist, ecological, or psychoanalytic perspectives. Iconic characters such as Sita, Draupadi, or Meera are reimagined to foreground agency, inner conflict, and resistance, enabling audiences to engage with age-old narratives in ways that resonate with contemporary sensibilities. These reinterpretations maintain fidelity to the aesthetic grammar of the Nāṭyaśāstra while allowing for creative expansion.

5. Institutional and Academic Integration

Classical dance has become an integral part of formal education in universities and conservatories, studied not only as practice but also as cultural history, performance theory, and embodied knowledge (Vatsyayan, 1977; Dhananjayan & Dhananjayan, 2004). This institutionalization has expanded research, critical discourse, and scholarly engagement, facilitating interdisciplinary study and international academic exchange, and ensuring that classical dance maintains both theoretical rigor and contemporary relevance.

6. Collaborative and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Dancers increasingly collaborate with artists across diverse fields—including visual arts, literature, cinema, and music—to create interdisciplinary works. These collaborations integrate traditional choreographic grammar with contemporary sensibilities, fostering holistic artistic ecosystems and promoting innovation while honoring classical principles.

7. Increased Global Representation and Cultural Diplomacy

Indian classical dance has emerged as a key instrument of cultural diplomacy, showcased at international festivals, academic symposia, and global cultural forums. Practitioners act as cultural ambassadors, presenting Indian classical aesthetics to global audiences while simultaneously absorbing and exchanging global influences in a respectful and dialogic manner (Kurien, 2017). Such engagement reinforces the role of classical dance as both a national heritage and a living, internationally recognized art form.

Conclusion:

Viewed through the lens of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the evolution of Indian classical dance reveals a complex interplay of continuity and transformation that transcends temporal, cultural, and geographical boundaries. Rooted in a codified system of aesthetics, technique, and expressive theory, these dance traditions have not only survived centuries of socio-political upheaval but have also actively redefined themselves to remain culturally resonant and artistically vital. From sacred temple rituals to royal courts, from regional adaptations to contemporary global stages, Indian classical dance exemplifies the dynamic synthesis of tradition and innovation.

Anchored in the timeless principles of **rasa**, **bhāva**, **nṛtta**, and **nṛtya**, classical dance forms have evolved into multidimensional practices that function simultaneously as vehicles for storytelling, cultural identity, intellectual inquiry, and socio-political engagement. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides both a theoretical foundation and an adaptable framework that supports creative expansion without compromising philosophical depth. In contemporary contexts, dancers engage with digital technologies, global movement vocabularies, and interdisciplinary collaborations, demonstrating how the art form continues to be historically grounded yet forward-looking.

Ultimately, Indian classical dance emerges as a living tradition—an ever-evolving embodiment of aesthetic excellence, spiritual inquiry, and cultural dialogue. Its enduring ability to adapt while preserving its foundational ethos ensures its relevance and transformative power, reaffirming its significance as both a historical legacy and a vibrant, contemporary art form.

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