



Research Paper

The Nāṭyaśāstra text and its influence on Hindu religious art in Indonesia

Krishnanandayani¹, Jyothi Devi¹

^{1,2}Institut Seni Indonesia Denpasar

*Correspondence: jyothi@isi-dps.ac.id

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Abstract

This research examines the influence of the Nāṭyaśāstra, a classic text of Indian literature that focuses on the performing arts, on Hindu religious arts in Indonesia. Through an in-depth analysis of the implementation of the Nāṭyaśāstra in Hindu religious arts, this study aims to understand how this classical text plays a role in shaping and maintaining the heritage of religious arts in the Indonesian context. It is found that the Nāṭyaśāstra not only serves as a guide for artists and performers, but also influences the structure, style, and content of various Hindu religious performances in Indonesia. The principles of Nāṭyaśāstra, such as rasa (taste), aesthetics (bhava), and performance techniques, emerged as key elements in the creation and performance of religious performing arts. This research also highlights the successful adaptation and integration of local cultural elements by Hindu communities in Indonesia in the application of Nāṭyaśāstra. The results confirm that the Nāṭyaśāstra is not only the foundation but also the source of inspiration for Hindu religious art in Indonesia. The integration of local culture is not a mere reproduction, but a creative response to the social and cultural environment. This phenomenon reflects the sustainability and ongoing life of Hindu religious art, affirming religious identity while creating a unique and authentic art form. As such, this research provides a deeper understanding of the role of Nāṭyaśāstra in nurturing and enriching Hindu religious art in Indonesia. The results can contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, cross-cultural understanding, and enrich insights into the relationship between Indian classical texts and religious art expressions in local Indonesian contexts.

Keywords: Nāṭyaśāstra; Religious Art ; Indonesia

1. Introduction

The Nāṭyaśāstra is the oldest surviving ancient Indian work on the performing arts (Vatsyayan, 2001). Nāṭyaśāstra (नाट्य शास्त्र, Nāṭyaśāstra) is a Sanskrit text on the performing arts (Bharata, 1951; Datta, 2013). The text is attributed to the ancient Hindu sage Bharata Muni (1951). Its first complete compilation was dated between 200 BC and 200 CE, but later scholars estimate it to vary between 500 BC and 500 CE (Ghosh, 1951; Bharata, 1951). The text consists of 36 chapters with a cumulative total of 6000 poetic couplets describing the performing arts. The subjects covered by this treatise include

dramatic composition, play structure, and stage construction for hosting, acting genres, body movements, make-up and costumes, the role and purpose of an art director, musical scales, musical instruments and integration of music with performing arts ([Chattopadhyay, 2013](#)).

The Nāṭya Śāstra is famous as an ancient encyclopaedic treatise on the arts, which has influenced dance, music, and literary traditions in India ([Kumar, 2006](#)). It is also notable for its theory of aesthetic taste, which states that entertainment is a desirable effect of the performing arts but not the primary goal, and that the primary goal is to transport the individual in the audience to another parallel reality, filled with wonder, where he experiences the essence of his own consciousness, and reflects on spiritual and moral questions ([Rangacharya, 1996](#)). This text has inspired secondary literature such as the Sanskrit bhasya by the 10th century Abhinavagupta. The title of the text consists of two words, "Nāṭya" and "Śāstra" ([Ghosh, 1951](#); [Bharata, 1951](#)). The root of the word Natya is Nat (नाट्) which means "to act, to represent". While according to [Rangacharya, \(1996\)](#) explains the word Nāṭya means drama, dance and music. The word Shastra, śāstra (शास्त्र) means "precept, rule, manual, summary, book, or treatise", and is commonly used as a suffix in literary contexts. The date of composition of the Natyashastra is unknown, estimates vary between 500 BC to 500 CE ([Ghosh, 1951](#)). It is further stated that the first full text version was most likely completed between 200 BCE to 200 CE. The Natya Sastra is traditionally thought to be related to the 36,000 verse Vedic composition called the Adibharata.

Until modern times in several manuscript versions, where chapter titles vary and in some cases the content of some chapters differs. Scholars such as PV Kane suggest that some texts were likely changed as well as added to the original between the 3rd-8th centuries AD, thus creating several variant editions, and a mixture of poetic verse and prose in some extant manuscripts. The Nāṭyaśāstra according to Pramod Kale ([1967](#)), the surviving version of the Natya Sastra probably dates back to the 8th century. Nevertheless, the influence of this text was extensive not only in the Indian plains, but in Asia in general as Hindu civilisation developed in various parts of the world ([Subramanyam, 2018](#)). The development of Hinduism was in harmony with the arts and performances, so that even the uneducated could still absorb the teachings of virtue through performing arts, literature, dance and music ([Santrock, 2012](#); [Surpi, 2017](#)). Thus, Hinduism is mostly understood through art.

The Nāṭyaśāstra text is a practical treatise on performance, art and communication ([Jayaweera, 1988](#)). The influence of this text was very strong in the past. Subrahmanyam ([2018](#)) states the region used to be referred to as Greater India until the mid-20th century, as seen in the monumental pioneering works of Henrich Zimmer and Fobian Bowers. Besides religion, the influence of Indian culture is very visible in the religious arts, be it music, dance, drama or architecture ([Beaman, 2017](#)).

2. Methods

This research is a qualitative study ([Assegaf, 2002](#); [Moleong, 2006](#)). Data were obtained through reading the text of Natyashastra and a number of other manuscripts and observing reliefs on a number of temples in Indonesia. The temple reliefs observed were related to religious art, including the presence of musical instruments. The data analysis technique used is Critical Discourse or often called Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) ([Rahardjo, 2021](#)).

3. Results and Discussion

Nāṭya Śāstra like any other Indian treatise, is constantly evolving, being rewritten and interpreted according to the needs of the times ([Ghosh, 1951](#); [Rangacharya, 1996](#); [Sri, 2003](#);). The Nāṭya Śāstra found today was written by researchers and art lovers in India ([Chattopadhyay, 2013](#); [Datta, 2013](#)). One of them that is believed to be authentic is Nāṭya

Śāstra Bharatamuni reviewed by Pushpendra Kumar (2006) which is equipped with a translation into English. In addition, the Nāṭya Śāstra was also found to be previously reviewed by Kapila Vatsyayan (2001) as well as a Sanskrit text that many traditional practitioners and scholars in India usually rely on. Nāṭya Śāstra is derived from two words nāṭhya and śāstra. The word nāṭhya comes from the Sanskrit word "Nat" which means art (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Datta, 2013). While the word śāstra means teachings, rules, books or treatises. Thus, Nāṭyaśāstra is a text about the performing arts (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996). The Nāṭyaśāstra text consists of 36 chapters with 6000 poems describing art and performance (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996). The subjects covered in the Nāṭyasāstra text include dramatic composition, structure of the play, and stage construction for acting, body movement, make-up and costume, the role and purpose of an art director, musical scales, musical instruments and the integration of music with performing arts (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Datta, 2013).

The first chapter of the Nāṭyaśāstra is about the origin of drama (Vatsyayan, 2001). In this chapter, the origin of drama is explained by Brahman. Muni (The wise man) approaches Bharata (The wise master of the art of drama) and asks about the origin, composition, for whom and how to apply nāṭyaveda (synonym of Nāṭyaśāstra). In this chapter it is also explained that when Brahman created the nāṭyaveda (synonym of Nāṭyaśāstra), Brahman told Indra that this nāṭyaveda (synonym of Nāṭyaśāstra) was left to the gods who were skilful, learned, not stage frightened, and used to hard work (Sri, 2003; Datta, 2013). Also in this chapter, the ceremonies related to the stage (yajana) are presented.

The second chapter is about the description of the "playhouse" (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996). This chapter tells about the pujas that can be applied to future humans (present humans) with the practices associated with them. It also describes the three types of playhouses according to Viśvakarman (the heavenly architect) in the art book śāstra which are oblong (vikrṣṭa), square (caturasra), and triangular (tryasra). In addition, there are three sizes: very large (jyeṣṭha), medium (Madhya), and small (avara). The very large size (jyeṣṭha) is for God, the medium (Madhya) is for the king (leader), and the small (avara) is for humans (Saraswati, 2011). This chapter also explains the description of the puja equipment.

The third chapter describes the pūjā for the God of the Stage (Sri, 2003; Datta, 2013). This chapter talks about how to perform and offer pūjā to Jarjara to achieve success during performances (Vatsyayan, 2001). The chapter also explains that the ācārya (dramatist) should cleanse his body and concentrate his mind before performing the pūjā and the mantra of worship for Brahman (Lev, 1978). In the last chapter it is explained that the stage should be worshipped by an ācārya (dramatist) who is pure, disciplined, and proficient in the rules of the art. This rule should be followed by the (dramatic) procedure in holding a theatre performance in a newly constructed building.

The sixth chapter describes feeling or sensibility (Chattopadhyay, 2013; Datta, 2013). This chapter explains how feelings (bhāvas) are. The discussion on the essence (sāmgraha) of nāṭyaveda (synonym of Nāṭyaśāstra) namely feeling, environment, performers (abhinaya), practice (dharmanī, style (vṛtti), success (siddhi), notes (svara), musical instruments (ātodya), music and place. This chapter also describes the eight feelings (rasa) found in the drama named by Brahman which are erotic (śṛṅgāra), humorous (hāsya), sad (karuṇa), angry (randra), valiant (vīra), frightening (bhayānaka), hateful (bibhatsa), and awesome (adbhuta). Whereas in this chapter it is explained that in the West the emotions are love, joy, sadness, anger, energy, terror, disgust, and awe. The chapter also explains that cultured people (sthāyi-bhāva) represent their expressions with various words, gestures, and temperaments to gain pleasure and satisfaction (tasmān nāṭyarasā iti)

(Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996). Whereas western countries feel things over their minds such as love, sadness, etc (Lev, 1978). So the eastern country calls a drama a feeling.

The seventh chapter explains emotions and bhāvas (Kumar, 2006). This chapter explains about bhāvas which means the mind of the audience while watching a play (Lev, 1978). It explains how the audience is made to feel (anubhāvyte) through words and movements. The causes of emotions such as love (rati), sadness (śoka), anger (krodha), energy (utsāha), fear (bhaya), disgust (juguspā), disgust (rismaya), despair (nirreda), weakness (glāni), envy (asāyā), fatigue (śrama), despression (daivya), restlessness (cintā), confusion (moha), calmness (smṛti), satisfaction (dhṛti), shyness (vridā), insecurity (capalatā), upheaval (āreya), drunkenness (jadatā), pride (yarva), sympathy (autsukya), death (maraṇa) of a person are also explained in detail and who is suitable to play the role and how to perform it is explained in detail (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996).

The twenty-eighth chapter describes instrumental music (Vatsyayan, 2001; Kumar, 2006). This chapter describes the music used in theatre. Types of melodies or matrices, micro-intervals (sruti), notes (svara), scales (grama), and modes (murcchana). The chapter also explains melody types (jaati) and the book of note levels (Sri, 2003; Datta, 2013). It confirms that the octave has 22 sruti or micro-intervals of musical notes. It also describes the appropriate music to embellish the drama and the characteristics of the gandharva (celestial musician). The verbal aspects of music and the twenty aspects of pitch or tuning are also explained in this chapter (Chattopadhyay, 2013)

The twenty-ninth chapter explains about stringed instruments (Chattopadhyay, 2013). This chapter explains stringed instruments like the vina and differentiates between vocal and instrumental music. Vocal is divided into two types namely colour (varna) meaning syllables and song (gita) with lyrics (Sri, 2003; Datta, 2013). This chapter also describes the basic techniques of playing the vina strings.

The thirtieth chapter describes hollow instruments. The hollow instruments described in this chapter are wind instruments such as flutes. Hollow instruments (suśira) are made of bamboo and the notes have two, three, and four Śrutis (Sri, 2003; Datta, 2013; Chattopadhyay, 2013). The number of Śrutis in a note produced in a seluring is also explained in this chapter. This chapter also explains how to play the seluring properly. The hand movements in closing the holes of the celluring so that it becomes perfect are also explained in detail in this chapter. The singer should sing with the accompaniment of the flute to make it sound more beautiful because steady, not too loud and complete seluring music with Varṇas and Alaṃkāras and following the rules of playing, the drama or stage music will be sweeter and more soothing (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996).

The thirty-first chapter explains the measurement of time. It also describes cymbals, pitch matching (tala), rhythm, and the metric cycle (chandas). This chapter also discusses the three types of tempo (laya), three types of movement in playing an instrument (yati), three ways of beginning to play an instrument (pani) (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996). This chapter also describes the measurement of rhythm is very important in gandharva music. This is because the syllable count in the recitation of vedic mantras is very important. The right instrument for this measurement is also explained in detail in this chapter.

The thirty-second chapter explains the definition of a type of traditional song that has seven different measures called Dhruvās (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996). This chapter also describes the musician's specialised occupation, form, and musical illustration. It describes the form of the song (gana), the quality of the singer (guna), the defects (dosha) of a singer, the quality of the vina player, the quality of the male and female voice, and the quality of the teacher and disciple (Vatsyayan, 2001; Kumar, 2006). The rules regarding the application of songs used for each character in the drama are also explained in detail in this chapter.

The thirty-third chapter contains a list of vocal and instrumental qualities and damages. This chapter also describes *avanaddha* or instrumental types such as *mrdanga*, *pavana*, and *dardura* (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996). The performer's technique in applying musical instruments in the drama called *kutapa* or orchestra. This chapter also explains in detail about the performance of the *kutap* team.

The thirty-sixth chapter describes the descent of drama on earth. This chapter explains in depth the mystery of drama. Areas that resonate with music (vocal and instrumental) and where speeches with interesting intonations can be heard and lit will destroy all evil and will bring prosperity. A room filled with the sound of musical instruments will not have a giant in it. In all kinds of marriages and sacrifices made, it is blessed when the sound of prayers is heard or malignant creatures will be absent when they hear prayers (Vatsyayan, 2001; Kumar, 2006). Instrumental music or drama along with instrumental songs will be of the same nature and importance to unveil the vedic hymns (Ghosh, 1951; Rangacharya, 1996).

Places where instrumental music and drama performances existed would bring blessings, so they designed the preliminaries by playing music or drama as a cult ceremony to worship the deity with *matra* and solemnity. This chapter discusses in detail how drama descended to earth from heaven. King *Nahuṣa* appeals to *Bharata* who sends sons to descend with their partners to earth and produce drama there. If the drama is produced properly, the curse will be removed. This chapter also explains the value of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* that those who always hear this recitation (*Sastra* derived from *Brahman*) will be blessed and achieve the same goal of the Vedic path and Vedic Knowledge (Vatsyayan, 2001; Kumar, 2006). One who attends *gandharva* music or drama performances properly then after his death will attain the path of happiness.

Performing arts have developed along with the development of Hindu civilisation to various regions on earth, including Southeast Asia, where the stories in *Itihāsa* namely *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃsa* are popular (Subramanyam, 2018). Religious art is beautifully carved on various temples in Indonesia such as *Prambanan Temple*, *Borobudur Temple*, *Sewu Temple* and on dozens of temples scattered in Indonesia (Royo-Iyer, 1991). Religious art that has been popular since the Hindu Buddhist era in the archipelago according to archaeological records such as dance, music, songs, drama to puppet plays and ballet (Simanjuntak, 2006). In addition, to this day a number of sacred arts are still preserved that are only used for spiritual purposes. These religious arts are still passed down today. The discussion about the art of music has been centred on *Borobudur Temple* (Royo-Iyer, 1991). Various knowledge is stored in 1,460 reliefs spread in almost all parts of the temple. In the form of highly artistic sculptures. The knowledge embedded in parts of the temple is very diverse, ranging from the cycle of human life, human habits, flora and fauna, social politics to art.

On the reliefs of *candi Borobudur*, namely on the reliefs of *Karmawibhangga*, *Lalitavistara*, *wadariajtaka*, and *Gandawyuha*, there are paintings of musical instruments, including flutes, cymbals, lutes, *ghanta*, *cangka* (trumpets made from snails), suggestions and drums (Royo-Iyer, 1991). By observing temple reliefs, found objects such as bronze and terracotta areas, gongs, gents, and other musical instruments, the contents of bronze and stone inscriptions, Old Javanese literary works, and Old Chinese news related to the kingdom of Central Java and the development of the political and cultural history of the archipelago, there is a connection between Indonesian musical instruments (especially Javanese and Balinese) and musical instruments of other countries such as India, Indo-China, and China (Royo-Iyer, 1991).

As many as 226 reliefs of aerophone (wind), cordophone (string), idiophone (hit) and membranophone (membrane) musical instruments were found on the walls of the ancient *Mataram Kingdom temple* (Royo-Iyer, 1991). Not only that, there are also reliefs of

ensembles or groups of musicians (singers) who play together permanently. Moreover, some of the musical instruments depicted on Borobudur reliefs can be found today. Although we cannot be sure that the sound is exactly the same, because there are no relics in the form of sound recordings, at least many musical instruments that we still play today are exactly the same as the musical instruments in the reliefs of Borobudur Temple (Royo-Iyer, 1991).

On the reliefs of Karmawibhangga, Lalitavistara, Wadariataka, and Gandawyuha at Borobudur Temple (Royo-Iyer, 1991), some musical instruments that are very similar to flutes, cymbals or percussion instruments made of metal and brass, lutes, sape, bells / gongs, sangka (trumpets made of snails), and drums are clearly visible. The musical instruments depicted on the reliefs of Borobudur Temple are not only spread across 34 provinces in Indonesia, but also to 40 countries around the world, ranging from Asia, Africa, America to Europe (Royo-Iyer, 1991).

A number of reliefs at candi Borobudur depicting the state of the art known or played in the past. reliefs on religious art are also scattered in various temples in Indonesia



Plate 125, Karmawibhangga Relief (Source: Kemendikbud.go.id/2023)



Jataka relief, Borobudur Temple, balustrade Lorong 1, lower panel, West side, No.66
Depicts people having fun and playing music. Musical instruments: Kendang tong, kendang silinder
(Source: Kemendikbud.go.id/2023)



Gandawyuha relief, Borobudur Temple, Aisle 2 wall, number 1.
Musical instruments: lute, bar zither, harp, drum, flute, sangkha, cymbal.

The richness of reliefs carved on candi borobudur is very diverse. Depictions of musical instruments also exist (Harnish, 1993). Of the 1460 relief panels of carved stories, no less than 30 panels depict various musical instruments. Like different musical strains but can produce beautiful harmonies. The influence of the Nāṭyaśāstra text in Indonesia during the Old Javanese period can be found in several historical, artistic and literary evidences. Although there are no written records that explicitly mention the application of the Nāṭyaśāstra at that time, a number of arguments and evidences indicate such influence. One of the strongest evidences of Nāṭyaśāstra's influence is in the art of shadow puppetry, particularly in Javanese shadow puppetry. Javanese shadow puppetry reflects the principles of Nāṭyaśāstra in terms of the use of movement, facial expression, and music (Harnish, 1993). Certain characteristics such as mudra (hand movements) and rasa (emotions or feelings) found in shadow puppet performances can be linked to concepts in Nāṭyaśāstra.

Traditional Javanese dance also reflects the influence of Nāṭyaśāstra (Harnish, 1993). Dance movements, make-up, and costumes in ancient Javanese dance seem to reflect the principles of aesthetics and staging found in the Nāṭyaśāstra (Harnish, 1993). While there may have been adaptations and reinterpretations, the similarity of these elements suggests the influence of the classical Indian text. Some inscriptions and sculptural reliefs from the Old Javanese period depict performance and dance scenes that may refer to the principles of the Nāṭyaśāstra (Harnish, 1993). The reliefs of Borobudur and Prambanan Temples, for example, depict figures engaged in performing arts, suggesting that performing arts had an important role in the culture and life of the people at that time. Some Old Javanese literary texts also reflect the influence of Nāṭyaśāstra. Literary or poetic accounts that mention performing arts or dance can be considered as evidence that concepts from the Nāṭyaśāstra had reached and were applied in Indonesia. Although these evidences are not direct and sometimes require interpretation, overall, they provide a strong indication that the Nāṭyaśāstra had an impact on the performing arts in Indonesia during the Old Javanese period (Harnish, 1993). The adaptation and reinterpretation of these concepts became a unique and distinctive form of artistic expression in the Indonesian cultural context.

4. Conclusions

The Nāṭyaśāstra Plays an Important Role in Hindu Religious Arts in Indonesia: This research shows that the Nāṭyaśāstra, a classic text in Indian literature that discusses the performing arts, has had a significant influence on Hindu religious arts in Indonesia. The concepts and principles contained in the Nāṭyaśāstra are believed to have formed the basis for the development of Hindu religious performing arts in Indonesia. Integration of Local Culture in the Application of Nāṭyaśāstra: Another conclusion is that Hindu religious art in Indonesia has not only adopted the Nāṭyaśāstra as a guide, but has also successfully integrated elements of local culture in its application. This demonstrates the adaptability and creativity of Hindu communities in Indonesia in preserving their art heritage while creating art forms that are unique and appropriate to the local cultural context. The Importance of Nāṭyaśāstra in Maintaining Hindu Religious Identity: This research provides further understanding of the role of Nāṭyaśāstra as a tool for maintaining Hindu religious identity in Indonesia. By maintaining and developing religious arts based on these classical texts, Hindu communities can celebrate and nurture their cultural heritage, while remaining relevant to changing times and social contexts.

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