



Reconstructing the Natyashastra tradition of Kathak through medieval sculptures of North Gujarat



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Abstract

The Natyashastra remains a critical source for understanding classical Indian dance, particularly the Margi tradition. However, Kathak's historical continuity, especially in North India, has been disrupted due to foreign invasions and fragmented documentation. This paper explores the role of visual archives—particularly temple sculptures—in reconstructing the medieval lineage of Kathak. Sculptures from the Sun Temple at Modhera and the Rani ki Vaav in Patan, Gujarat, provide compelling evidence of an active and evolving dance tradition rooted in Natyashastra principles. These carvings reflect codified movement vocabularies and aesthetics, suggesting a nuanced continuity that survived socio-political upheavals. By engaging intermedial sources—sculpture, regional literature, and miniature painting—this study highlights how multiple art forms interact to preserve and transmit embodied knowledge. The research posits that such visual records are not mere ornamentation but crucial links in mapping the creative and compositional flows of dance and music practices. These archives offer insight into how the Natyashastra tradition adapted and sustained itself in regional contexts, especially during the culturally rich Solanki era in Gujarat.

Keywords : Natyashastra, Kathak, visual archives, temple sculpture, intermediality

Research Paper

Introduction

The Indian classical dance tradition is a composite of movement, emotion, music, and sacred philosophy, rooted deeply in both textual and visual culture. Among the earliest and most comprehensive treatises on performance arts, Bharata's Natyashastra¹ (circa 2nd century BCE) (Muni) lays the foundation for dramaturgy and dance in India. Its exhaustive codification of karanas, angas, bhavas, and rasas offers a theoretical framework that has influenced the development of classical dance forms for centuries. Kathak, as a major North Indian classical dance style, has historically drawn from Hindu temple traditions and aesthetic refinements. However, its manifestations are often difficult to trace due to the oral nature of transmission and lack of written records specific to the form. The foreign invasions and systematic destruction of our texts during the medieval times creates a gap in the history of evolution of this art form.

In this context, the temple sculptures of medieval North Gujarat—particularly from sites such as the Sun Temple at Modhera, Rani ki Vaav, and the Adalaj step well—offer a rich, underexplored, and well-preserved visual archive. Intricately carved panels depicting dancers, musicians, and performative scenes serve not only as decorative motifs but as frozen moments of embodied movement, echoing the vocabulary described in the Natyashastra. While much attention has been paid to South Indian temples in tracing dance iconography, the temples of Gujarat have not been sufficiently examined for their potential contributions to understanding the evolution of Kathak in its pre-courtly phase.

This paper proposes to explore how the movement principles and performative aesthetics encoded in the Natyashastra are manifested in the sculptural art of North Gujarat. By decoding these visual narratives and aligning them with the grammar of classical dance, the

study aims to reconstruct an early visual tradition of Kathak that predates its more well-documented court-era development. In doing so, the research also attempts to reframe sculpture not merely as artistic embellishment but as an essential archival resource for the study of performative histories.

Research Problem

Even though the Natyashastra is considered as the basis of all Indian classical dances, there remains a significant gap in tracing how its principles were visually embodied and regionally interpreted in North India, particularly in relation to Kathak. The medieval temple sculptures of North Gujarat—though rich in dance iconography—have been largely overlooked as primary sources for reconstructing Kathak’s journey during medieval times. This research addresses the lack of scholarly attention to these sculptures as visual texts and investigates their potential to illuminate the reconstruction of the journey of the evolution of this dance form during the medieval times.

Objectives

This research aims:

- To examine how Kathak’s traditional grammar as per the Natyashastra is reflected in temple sculpture.
- To identify and decode specific dance elements (karanas, charis, hasta-mudras) in North Gujarat temple art.
- To analyse the interrelationship between textual prescriptions (Natyashastra and Abhinaya Darpana) and their visual manifestations in temple art.
- To situate these findings within the historical evolution of Kathak during the medieval period.

Hypothesis

Sculptural representations demonstrate the continuity and transformation of dance traditions that later crystallised as the elements of Kathak. The sculptures of medieval temples demonstrate that the evolution of Kathak cannot be understood solely through the patronage of Mughal courts, but they follow a shastric lineage conforming to the Natyashastra tradition. This is evident in the words of Sunil Kothari ji, who says,

‘The temple sculptures of medieval North Gujarat reflect a regional embodiment of Natyashastra-based dance aesthetics and serve as visual evidence of the journey of

Kathak and its evolution through the medieval times’² (Kothari)

Relevance of the study

This study offers a significant contribution to Indian dance scholarship by bridging the textual authority of the Natyashastra with the visual narratives found in North Gujarat’s temple sculpture. It reassesses Kathak’s historical trajectory and broadens the discourse beyond a court-centric origin narrative.

For art practitioners, the study strengthens interdisciplinary inquiry by integrating dance theory, art history, and iconographic methodology. At a societal level, the research underscores the role of temple sculpture as a visual archive, contributing to India’s intangible cultural heritage.

Research Methodology

My research is based on the Qualitative interpretative analysis method and proceeds through the following steps.

- Textual Analysis of the Natyashastra and Abhinaya Darpana, to establish a theoretical framework of dance grammar including karanas, charis and hasta mudras.
- Visual and iconographic Analysis of temple sculptures, & systematic documentation of sculptural panels at the Sun Temple at Modhera, Rani ki Vaav, and Adalaj ni Vaav.
- Correlation of sculptural representations with descriptions in classical dance treatises and codified techniques and elements of dance
- Historical Contextualisation and placement of findings within the socio-cultural parameters to trace continuities and transformations of dance practices.

This structured methodology enables a systematic evaluation of the hypothesis by testing whether sculptural representations correspond meaningfully to textual dance grammar and whether such correspondences indicate a lineage relevant to Kathak’s evolution.

Discussion

As per the words of ‘Choodamani Nandgopal,³ (Nandagopal) *“When viewed in totality, temples in India can rightly be considered the cradle of Indian art forms.”* Indian temple architecture has hundreds of sculptures exhibiting musical instruments, dance postures, costumes, and techniques of dance, as



prevalent in the respective period. The combined use of dance and sculpture was probably inspired by the Marga tradition⁴ of temple dancing, and made the sculptors think of creating these enchanting images of dancing girls. They created beautiful and varied poses of nayikas in stone and placed these sculptures to portray elements of beauty and evoke 'rasa' in the hearts of the viewers.⁵ (Coomaraswamy) This was possible because the sculptors learnt dance and anatomy along with sculpture, and thereby enriched their medium of expression. This made Indian architecture and sculpture inseparable from dance. (Vatsyayan Kapila)⁶

Any attempt at reconstructing a history of the classical dance in India, therefore would rely not only on dance texts and commentaries down from the Natyashastra, but that which was preserved in the statues of the temples. Cross references to these sculptural libraries would be necessary for understanding the evolution of Indian dance. In the words of Kapila Vatsyayan in her book 'Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts, on Page 262, "every figure of Indian sculpture is, like every pose and gesture in Indian dancing, highly symbolic, and each figure has a particular evocative quality." (Vatsyayan Kapila)

A rich culture evolved in Gujarat during the reign of the Hindu kings, when Patan was the seat of government. The dance sculptures at temples and step wells, 'provide tangible evidences of an intangible art.' (Kothari) At the sun temple in Modhera, the 'Nrityamandapam' was specifically constructed for dance. The panels are intricately carved with exquisite sculptures of Gods and Goddesses, Devi-devatas, Dashavataras, Yakshis, Kinnars and Gandharvas, and dancers and musicians. The dancing girls are expressive and sophisticated, with elongated limbs, attenuated waists, and rounded torsos.

The panel on the left figure 1, shows several devi-devatas and shaalbhanjikas⁷ in various dance poses. Figure on the right, Figure 2, shows many musicians with their instruments.



Figure 1



Figure 2

The dance sculptures are carefully chiselled out in perfect proportions. Great care has been taken to depict the various aspects of aangika abhinaya as described in the Natyashastra⁸ (Muni) and Abhinaya Darpanam (Nandikeshwar)⁹

Hast Mudras¹⁰ – The dance sculptures of Gujarat show the dancers making samyukta and asamyukta hast mudras as described in the Natyashastra. The pataka, katakamukha, mayura, suchi, trishul, Hansasya, pushpaputa, shivlinga, etc. are clearly seen in these sculptures.

Pada bheda¹¹ – The movement and the position of the feet while performing is clearly seen in the sculptures of the temples of Gujarat. We can see Sama, Agratalasanchara, Udghattita, Anchita, and kunchita.

Sthaanak¹² – We see various standing postures in the dancing sculptures, of which the most notable are Samapada, Vaishnava sthanak, Mandala sthaanak, and aalidha sthaanak .

Kati Bheda¹³ – Of all the postures and movements of the waist described in the Natyashastra, the Udhvaahita kati is of special importance.

Shirobheda¹⁴ – This refers to the ways in which the dancer positions her head while dancing. The most noteworthy as seen here are Dhootam, Avadhootam, Parivaahitam and Utkshiptam.

Chari¹⁵ – As described in the 'Natyashastra', there are 32 types of 'chari' (16 bhoomi charis, where the feet are moving at ground level, and 16 aakaash ki chari where the feet are raised above the knee level, sometimes even to the level of the chest.) Out of these, we can see very clearly the Baddha chari, samapada chari, and the sthitavarta chari.

Karanas¹⁶ –The word ‘Karana’ comes from the Sanskrit word ‘Kara’ which means doing, and denotes small units of basic dance movements. The dancing sculptures of Gujarat temples exquisitely show many of the 108 karanas described by Bharata muni, in the 4th chapter of ‘Tandava Lakshana’ in the Natyashastra.



Figure 3

The nayika in figure 3 is a typical example of the Nrittamurti, where the left foot is in samapada, and the right foot crosses over the other in swastika position, and rests on the ground on the toe in agratalasanchara. The big toe is in the urdhvangushtha position. The knees are in Kshipta position. The posture is of the tribhanga, with the head in the natam position. The dancer is looking at the left hand which is raised in the Pataka mudra. The right hand is in front in the dhyaan mudra depicting the alapallava.



Figure 4

The nayika in figure 4 is a fine example of the Baddha chaari. The thighs and shanks are in the svastika position. The right foot is in samapada, and the left foot is in front while the knees are crossing each other. This is the typical position of the feet after the dancer lifts her foot upto the knee, crosses the other foot and lets it drop to the ground in Baddha Chaari. It shows the Urdhvangushtha, where the big toe is slightly raised. The Kati is in the Uddhvaahita position, and the hands are raised over the head and interlocked as if in languor. The jewellery is intricate, and of special mention is the necklace, which has been carved out very beautifully, as if hanging out of the sculpture, and the piece hanging from the waist, as if in motion. The texture of the cloth on her legs can also be seen. A small man with a beard is seen at the side of her leg.

This nayika in Figure 5 is a beautiful example of the ‘Darpanasundari’. According to the Shilpashastra¹⁷ called ‘Kshirarnava’,¹⁸ a devangana holding a mirror, and in a dancing pose, is classified as ‘vidhichita’. She is standing in Tribhanga with the head in Avadhootam position, looking into the mirror held by her right hand in mushthi hast. Her left hand is raised to her head and seems to be in ardhachandra mudra as if fixing her hair. Her jewellery is elaborate, as if belonging to the royal family. There is a lady at her feet who is carrying something on her head.

These temples are a proof that the medieval age was characterised by the splendour of its buildings and monuments resulting in a legacy of immense architectural and sculptural wealth. The exquisite dance sculptures found here are the embodiment of form,



rhythm, unity, synthesis of structure and harmony in the architectural space. Inscriptional and textual evidences reveal that the Nriyamandapam was an important part of the temple where dance as a ritual was performed and offered to the Gods. Hence, we see why and how the art of dance scaled new heights with due emphasis on the Margi aspect of the Natyashastra tradition.



Figure 5

The findings of this study reveal a compelling convergence between the codified aesthetics of the Natyashastra and the sculptural representations of dance. Through iconographic analysis of select temples—such as the Sun Temple at Modhera, and the step wells of North Gujarat, it becomes evident that the sculptors were not merely crafting decorative figures, but encoding a lived and practiced tradition of dance rooted in shastric principles. The presence of identifiable karanas, symmetrical bhangis, and expressive mudras indicates a movement vocabulary that parallels the foundational structures of classical Indian dance.

The relationship between sculpture and dance is like the path that exists apart from any person who walks it. It is like a sculpture made by a sculptor. It is to be noted that the dance is the sculpture, but the dancer is not. The

dancer is the sculptor who gently chisels out the dance to be presented to the rasikas. (Chaitanya).¹⁹ These visual records suggest that Kathak, in its early phases, may have shared a common classical base with other forms, before regional and courtly influences differentiated its style.

Furthermore, this research affirms the importance of visual archives in reconstructing ephemeral traditions. Unlike texts, which can be prescriptive and abstract, sculpture offers embodied, contextual glimpses of how dance was performed, viewed, and ritualized. This supports a broader methodological shift in dance research—one that embraces intermedial sources, including architecture, sculpture, painting, and oral narratives.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited by the interpretive nature of visual analysis, as temple sculptures lack textual annotations confirming their alignment with Natyashastra principles. The geographic focus is confined to select temples in North Gujarat, excluding other potentially relevant sites. Additionally, while connections to Kathak are explored, the research does not aim to reconstruct its full early repertoire, which would require broader interdisciplinary and field-based inquiry.

Conclusion

This study has sought to explore how the foundational principles of the Natyashastra are reflected in the sculptural heritage of North Gujarat, and how these visual archives contribute to understanding the early development of Kathak. The temple sculptures examined—through their depiction of dynamic postures, codified gestures, and devotional narratives—offer compelling evidence of a dance tradition grounded in shastric aesthetics long before Kathak's courtly refinement. It challenges the linear and court-centric narrative of Kathak's evolution, suggesting a more robust, regionally grounded tradition of a sacred temple-performance tradition.

By decoding these images in dialogue with classical texts, the research underscores the value of sculpture as a vital resource in reconstructing India's performative past. It enriches the historiography of Kathak and encourages a broader interdisciplinary engagement between dance, art history, and archaeology. It invites practitioners and scholars alike to reimagine classical dance as a living tradition shaped by both movement and memory—preserved not only in bodies and texts but also in stone. The prominence of female dancers,

devotional contexts, and narrative gestures also align with emphasis on abhinaya and bhakti rasa, particularly in Vaishnavite and Jain contexts of Gujarat.

I would like to end with the following quote by Malvina Hoffman-

“Sculpture is a parable in three dimensions, a symbol of a spiritual experience, and a means of conveying truth by concentrating its essence into visible form. ... It must be the reflection of the artist who creates it and of the era in which he lives, not an echo or a memory of other days and other ways.”²⁰ (Hoffman)

References

1. The Nāṭya Shāstra is a Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts. The text is attributed to sage Bharata, and its first complete compilation is dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary between 500 BCE and 500 CE.
2. The paper by Sunil Kothari ji was the inspiration behind my trip to North Gujarat and visiting the temples there, and looking at sculptures in the temples and step wells of the Patan area.
3. Nandagopal, Choodamani. “Ancient Indian Wisdom.” n.d. <http://ancientindianwisdom.com/culture-overview/indian-dance-and-other-arts>. <<http://ancientindianwisdom.com/culture-overview/indian-dance-and-other-arts>>.
4. The Maarga tradition of dance literally means following the maarga, or the path shown by the shastra.
5. Coomaraswamy, Ananda. The Dance of Shiva and other fourteen essays. New york Noon day, 1957. english.
6. Vatsyayan Kapila. Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts. Sangeet Natak Academy, 1968. English.
7. In Hindu and Jain art, a shaalabhanjika is any statue or statuette, usually female, that breaks the monotony of a plain wall or space and thus enlivens it
8. Natya shastra written by Bharat Muni is the oldest treatise on Dance and Drama and describes the various parts of the body and their recommended movement for Abhinaya.
9. Abhinaya Darpanam written by Acharya Nandikeshwara is a text based on the Natyashastra, but written for the purpose of Abhinaya in Dance.
10. Hast Mudras as described in the Natyashastra are hand gestures of the performer, depicting a certain meaning.
11. Pada Bheda as per the Natya shastra is the movement or the positioning of the feet while performing
12. As per the Naatya shastra, Sthaanak is the posture, or the performer’s style of standing
13. Kati Bheda refers to the various movements or positions of the waist of the performer
14. Shirobheda refers to the ways in which the dancer positions her head while dancing. The Natyashastra describes 13 kinds of movements and positions of the head.
15. Chaari, as described in the ‘Natyashastra’ is the simultaneous movement of the feet, shanks and hip. In short, the movement of the legs.
16. Karanas are a set of 108 key transitional movements that connect various dance postures or positions and are used to depict stories, emotions, and themes in a dance performance.
17. Shilpashastra (शिल्पशास्त्र, śilpaśāstra) represents the ancient Indian science (shastra) of creative arts (shilpa) such as sculpture, iconography, and painting. Closely related to Vastushastra (architecture).
18. Kshiramava is a text in sanskrit on ‘Vaastu vidya’ or the science of architecture, written by Vishwakarma.
19. Chaitanya, Krishna. A profile of Indian Culture. Clarion Books, 1982. English.
20. Hoffman, Malvina. Sculpture inside and out. George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1939. English.

