

Nāṭyaśāstra's Influence on the Genres of Modern Dance and Contemporary Ballet

Prakruti Prativadi

Abstract

More than 2000 years ago, dance, music and drama flourished in the Indian subcontinent not just as a form of artistic expression but as highly technical yet spiritually transcending sacred aesthetics derived directly from the Veda-s. The Nāṭyaśāstra is not just a theoretical treatise, its author Bharata elucidates the principle of *Rasa*. The principle of *Rasa* provides insight into the human condition, explaining why art is enjoyable. The Nāṭyaśāstra was the authoritative text on art for millennia. However, the text of the Nāṭyaśāstra was translated into English and mined for its rich insight into art and the human consciousness and, for the first time to the Western mind, linked art with the human consciousness.

Professional dancer Ruth St. Denis studied Hindu philosophy, *itihāsas*, *purāṇas*, learned Indian dance and visited India. She incorporated Indian Hindu dance and metaphysics into her own dance techniques and influenced her students and others who were important innovators in the Modern Dance movement such as Martha Graham and Ted Shawn. She influenced George Balanchine who innovated Contemporary Ballet. .

Full Paper

There is much that is unacknowledged about the contributions and outright source material for many Western dance genres and movements. One such unacknowledged source is the contribution of Indian *Nāṭya*, as codified in the Nāṭyaśāstra, to the genres of Modern dance, and Neoclassical/Contemporary ballet. Though the general term "Eastern philosophy and culture" are sometimes attributed as the inspiration and source for the founders of the modern dance genre, the Hindu metaphysics and sacred aesthetic treatises that were the impetus for the birth of these Western genres are universally left unacknowledged. There is ample evidence that the founders of these genres were heavily influenced and studied the Hindu dances and philosophy as the basis for their revolutionary movements as this paper discusses. The state of Western dance at that time consisted of classical ballet - which was characterized by stiff, rigid and formal movements that lacked freedom and flow as noted by practitioners and scholars; and vaudeville dancing was characterized as facetious and farcical. The dancers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries sought to reform the dance and infuse it with something new and fresh. They turned their attentions to the East, first to Greece, then Egypt, and finally to India and the revolutionary and heretofore unknown metaphysical principles of Hinduism. And it was in India, in the Hindu metaphysics and treatises that they found the material which they first blatantly copied and then appropriated by removing the obvious Indian and Hindu elements, as is the case with many other knowledge systems that have been appropriated from India.

'Discovery' of India (And Hindu Metaphysical Treatises)

William Jones was the first to translate a major Indian work. His translation of Kālidāsa's *Abhijāna-Śākuntalam*, which he called 'Sacuntala' heralded what his compatriots called the Discovery of India. His translation started an insatiable quest for imperial expansion into India as a possible link to the European's own past (via the now debunked Āryan Invasion theory). Jones' so-called discovery gave the

British colonizers the go-ahead to imperial expansion into India since, for the British colonizers, the Indian subcontinent could very well be an ancient extension of their own heritage. The translation of Sanskrit manuscripts prompted the “Oriental renaissance” and ushered in the Romantic movement and a European fascination with “everything Indian”¹.

More and more Sanskrit manuscripts were sought after; though the Europeans and Britishers didn’t know Sanskrit since they could not speak it or master it to the level demanded of a translator, they were able to find Indians who could help them understand it to the extent required. Thus, they were able to find and translate Sanskrit and Indian literature including treatises and the Veda-s. The 19th century saw European obsession with all things Indian. Moreover, these precious treatises and manuscripts opened up a whole new world to the Europeans, in botany, surgery, such as *Suśrta-saṃhitā*, metallurgy, philosophy and even in dance, music and the arts.

The influence on European and American art and aesthetics is heretofore unacknowledged. The translating of Indian aesthetic treatises and the underlying metaphysics therein brought about a revolution in Western art, and in particular Western dance, ushering in the two new dominant genres of Modern dance and contemporary /neoclassical ballet. Much of the Romantic movement (that started at the end of the 18th century and lasted into the 19th century) and transcendental movement were heavily influenced by the Indian philosophy and eastern thought as scholars have noted. The romantic moment put an emphasis on emotional states as the source and inspiration for aesthetics. The transcendental movement emphasized metaphysics and consciousness and derived from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and *Upaniṣads*. The French Romantic movement was also influenced by Hindu philosophy as Rousseau, Voltaire and others looked toward Indian philosophy as a source for their philosophical work. France had a long trading association with India back in the 17th century. These two movements were much in vogue within the artistic, literary, musical circles of the 19th century. It was at this time too that Hindu treatises were being translated and Europe’s fascination with Indian culture, metaphysics and art were at a peak.

As Voltaire himself said:

“I am convinced that everything has come down to us from the banks of the Ganges, – astronomy, astrology, metempsychosis, etc... It is very important to note that some 2,500 years ago at the least Pythagoras went from Samos to the Ganges to learn geometry...But he would certainly not have undertaken such a strange journey had the reputation of the Indians’ science not been long established in Europe.”

Later however, this Indophilia would be replaced by Indophobia wherein Indian contributions and sources would slowly be erased and Indian philosophy even condemned. This fascination with Hindu customs and practices and the later appropriation of them and condemnation of the original practice has been long documented by several scholars. There is no dispute that the 18th and 19th centuries India was a source of inspiration of the artistic and philosophical western world. At this time the principles of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* already had been written about and translated by several Western scholars.

As mentioned, the first forays into translating the texts (With help from pandits) was made by William Jones, with the help of a Sanskrit Pandit Ramalocana, he wrote the English translation of *Shakuntala* and while doing so he learned from the pandits of India the sacred aesthetic principles and theories contained in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Jones’ study of Indian literature and treatises was detailed and extensive and with the help of local Indian scholars and practitioners. His works published in 1807 amounted to 13 volumes covering Indian music and dance systems, Indian botany and even Indian medicine and cure for diseases. In the preface of his translation of *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam*, Jones talks of the principles of Indian drama and dance and states that Indian dramaturgy and poetics “must have been immemorial in India” and that they were developed by a sage named “Bheret” (sic). Thus, the main metaphysical aesthetic principles expounded by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Rasa* and *Bhāva* reached

Europe well before the 19th century through William Jones. Jones' translation of *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam* triggered a European fascination and scholarly and practical quest to learn more about the Indian treatises. This fascination was so pronounced and widespread the famed German philosopher Goethe based the prologue of his famous work *Faust* after *Kālidāsa*.

Jones' translations and writings about Indian philosophy, literature and sciences was followed by more and more European scholars seeking local Sanskrit pandits to help them translate more manuscripts, plays and treatises. As early as 1826, Horace Hayman Wilson authored, with the help of pandits and experts to explain the original to him, in English, the translation of the play *Mrchchakīṭika* by Śūdraka. This also contained an extensive summary of the principles in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* which were known then to Indian artists, dramatists and playwrights. Wilson explains in detail the *Bhāvas*, *Vibhāvas*, and *Vyabhicāri Bhāvas* and *Sāttivka Bhāvas* that Bharata details in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Wilson explains *Rasa* as well in his work. He also explains *Nritya*, *Nṛtta* and *Nāṭya* and their differences.

What is the significance of the *Rasa* theory of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to Europeans?
For the first time, Europeans came across an aesthetic theory that was deeply metaphysical and connected art, music and dance and drama to human emotions and psyche. The aesthetic theory of the Greeks which is what European aesthetics is based and developed from did not do so.

As Herman Wilson states: "The purpose of dramatic presentation ... must effect the mind of the spectators with the sentiments which they are supposed to express... termed by the Hindus: *Rasa*." A perusal of Hindu plays ... present original design and national development." Which shows the aesthetics of the Hindus are unique and do not share much with the Greeks or Chinese. Thus, we see that the European introduction to India's sacred aesthetic system, which was well-developed and rigorous, brought forth new ideas to the Europeans which they readily acknowledged and sought as inspiration.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* contains a detailed and meticulous catalogue of *mudra*-s, wrongly referred to as 'gestures' by Indologists, movements of the head, eyes, legs, arms, thighs, torso and even the cheeks and mouth. This detailed catalogue of these movements was not merely external, as *Bhāratamūni* explains these movements are to be used by the dancer/actor for the purpose of *Abhinaya* - i.e. to bring forth *Bhāvas* and *Rasa* to the audience. These movements are a reflection of an internal psychological and emotional state that, on the external level, exhibit emotion. Of course, Bharata delved much further than mere topical emotions and psychology and went to the crux of human understanding - the human consciousness. According to Bharata, the *Rasa* state elevates the spectator's consciousness to a divine state of *Rasānanda*. As Abhinavagupta has explained, *Rasānanda* is akin to experiencing *Brahmānanda*. In other words, the art, if performed with the highest caliber can elevate the consciousness of the audience so they transcend themselves and experience a state of divine bliss which is akin to experience of *Brahmānanda* experienced in *samadhi*. However, to the western mind at that time, this was a bit too esoteric and they couldn't perhaps comprehend the metaphysics completely. But they were able to understand the rudimentary topical aspect of the *Rasa* and *Bhāva* Theory i.e., that external psychical movements of the body, whether it is the head, eyes, arms or the hands can mirror internal emotions. This was a revolutionary pathbreaking principle for the Western artistic world which had heretofore never been explored or expressed. The Romantic movement was heavily influenced by the translation of Indian plays and by the Indian spiritual aesthetic theory which had been explained in detail in other Indian commentaries. The artists of Romantic movement in the West, infused their own works with these Indian aesthetic ideas that emotion was the driving force in art. The Indian aesthetics and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* for the first time to the Europeans mind it connected metaphysics, psychology and emotions with art, drama, dance, literature, poetry and music. This was a completely new way to think of art in terms of connecting movement with emotions and psychology, especially dance and drama. These principles were entirely novel and revolutionary in Europe because it did not exist in either their philosophies or religions.

The Nāṭyaśāstra's foundational artistic metaphysical principles of *Rasa* and *Bhāva* were well known and in practice in India through Indian traditional dance, music and drama. Traditional dancers, singers and artists were trained and inculcated with the understanding of *Rasa* and *Bhāva* and its application. Additionally, the *hastamudras*, movements of the major and minor limbs, the *sthānakas* and the variations of the 108 *karana*-s from which the *adavu*-s or dance steps and hand movements are derived in the various dance styles of India all come from the Nāṭyaśāstra and were in practice in their local variations throughout India. These dance styles included, Bharatanāṭyam, Odissi, Yakṣagāna, Kucupudi, Kathak, Manipuri and others. All these styles of traditional dance were living representations of the principles of the Nāṭyaśāstra and of *Rasa* and *Bhāva* and were vibrantly being danced and presented in the 19th century. Many of these dancers were pejoratively called "Nautch Girls" by the British.

Romantic Movement

The Romantic movement had a significant impact on many artists, musicians and dancers of the 19th century in the Western world. Ruth St. Denis is credited as being one of the founders of the modern dance genre. The other was Isadora Duncan. Both Duncan and Denis were influenced by Francois Delsarte, who is credited with linking emotions to movement. Delsarte himself was influenced by the Romantic movement. Delsarte developed a system of gestural aesthetics and a theory in which he said physical expressive movement should reflect the internal emotion that originated that movement. This is the Abhinaya technique that is explained in the Nāṭyaśāstra and later Indian dramatic treatises. *Abhinaya*, as the Bharata explains, is the art of bringing *Bhāvas* and *Rasa* to the spectator. According to Bharata, Abhinaya uses every part of the body to embody an internal emotional and psychological state. It is obvious that Delsarte who was influenced by Romanticism which itself was influenced by Hindu metaphysics and Hindu aesthetics, borrowed from the Abhinaya and *Rasa* theory of the Nāṭyaśāstra to develop his "applied aesthetics". It is indeed telling that Delsarte even came up with distinct positions of the head and eyes just as is detailed by Bharata in the Nāṭyaśāstra under *Shiro Bedha* and *Drishti Bedha*. Delsarte is credited with founding "movement aesthetics" in Europe and his student Mackaye brought and taught these ideas to the US. Delsarte himself did not write any books on his technique, but passed them on to his students.

Western Dance in the 19th Century

In the US, dance at that time consisted of classical ballet and vaudeville-esque dances for entertainment. Classical ballet was characterized by restrictive costumes, stiff movements of the legs, storytelling usual in the form of a fairytale, and followed rigid rules of technique. Classical ballet was not athletic and was considered stiff and artificial by many dancers. Classical ballet is different from contemporary ballet in that it was not the athletic dynamic form that was free flowing that the latter contemporary ballet came to be. Vaudeville dancing consisted of farcical and comical acts that did not have any aesthetic or philosophical import. As a trained Bharatanāṭyam dancer and teacher, it is difficult for me to envision any dance style that does not embody the spiritual or emotional or effect the spectator emotionally or psychologically, but this is indeed the case with dance in the West until the last century before the Indian influence transformed it.

Nāṭyaśāstra and Hindu influence on Western Dance Genres

An acknowledged pioneering founder of modern dance in the US and West was Ruth St. Denis. She along Isadora Duncan are considered the founders of the modern dance genre in the US. Ruth St. Denis went on to influence the iconic modern dance influencers Martha Graham, Charles Weideman and Doris Humphrey. Furthermore, Ruth St. Denis influenced George Balanchine who revolutionized

classical ballet by founding the neoclassical and contemporary ballet genres in the United States. Ruth St. Denis was born as Ruth Dennis in 1879 in New Jersey. She trained in different dance forms starting from childhood including ballet, skirt dancing and social dance forms. She began her professional career as a dancer dancing in vaudeville houses. She looked to add something different and unique to her dance routines. She was noticed by a famous Broadway producer, David Belasco, who hired her for his dance company and changed her name to Ruth St. Denis. She toured the US and Europe with this dance company. In Europe she watched performances by eastern dancers and was immediately fascinated with Eastern culture and arts. She wanted to create her own dancing style by incorporating Eastern influences into her routines. Her first inspiration to materialize came in 1904 when she saw a cigarette poster advertisement that showed the Egyptian Goddess Isis. She experimented with adding ancient Egyptian costumes and jewelry into her routines.

Her most significant and life-altering experience came when she had the rare opportunity to actually witness authentic Indian dancers performing traditional Indian dances that embodied the sacred spiritual aesthetics of the Nāṭyaśāstra. Surprisingly, Denis did not have to make the long journey to India to witness these dances, but just to nearby Coney Island in New York. “Streets of Delhi” was a major attraction at Luna Park in Coney Island, with the attempt to recreate a durbar held in Delhi for Lord Curzon. At this attraction, Denis was mesmerized by the recreation of the authentic Indian atmosphere, authentic Indian people who were part of the exhibition, the clothes, costumes, customs and most importantly, the Indian traditional dances performed by real Indian dancers. Denis was especially interested in the sacred temple dancing of the *devadāsīs*. She was able to further gain knowledge about Hindu metaphysics, spirituality and dances by reading books about Indian aesthetics and dance at the Astor Library in Manhattan. She also gained further insight into Indian culture and Hinduism through discussions with the renowned Indophile Edmund Russell. From the Indian dancers and her research into Indian culture Denis came to imbibe the spiritual aesthetic that is the cornerstone of Indian *Nāṭya*. As Bharata explains in Nāṭyaśāstra, Denis came to understand that physical movements and poses should represent an inner emotional state and she then choreographed her dances with gestures, poses, and abstract movements, paying attention to space and form. These ideas are the very rootstock of Indian dances like Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Yakṣagāna, where space, movement and expression all intertwine to awaken *Rasa* and *Bhāva* in the spectator.

Ruth St. Denis’ first dance to incorporate all the things she had learned about emotional and spiritual facets of dance was a dance she called “Radha”. She performed it in New York at the store of a rich Indian merchant Jal Bhungara and the Maharaja of Baroda was one among the audience. She portrayed Radha wearing her version of Indian clothes and using real Indian immigrants, who lived in New York at that time, in the routine. A picture of a scene from that dance is below:

In “Radha,” Denis tried to show spiritualism and emotion in her dance, as she had understood it from the Indian dancers. Her dance was not authentic as she had not learned any Indian dance technique or style; however, she wanted to incorporate the spiritual aspect, as she understood them, into her dances. Her understanding of the Hindu spirituality was not complete or correct as seen through her writings and autobiography. She wanted to fashion her own type of spiritualism and emotionalism in her dances. St. Denis also wanted to be bold and exotic and bring something different to the dance scene. Her portrayal was an eroticized and exaggerated vision of Indian spiritualism and therefore inaccurate, but it had the effect she wanted in that it was noticed. She then performed “Radha” at the Hudson Theater by convincing the manager Henry Harris to finance her performance. She continued to perform “Radha” in the vaudeville circuit whenever she was given an opportunity, and she began to gain popularity and notice outside the vaudeville circle eventually gaining the appreciation and patronage of a society woman named Mrs. Orlando Rouland. With her support and patronage, Denis’ career took off and she added more Hindu themed routines to her repertoire. These were “Cobra”, “Nautch” and “Incense”. She received positive reviews which resulted in tours in Europe, and eventually even India in front of royal audiences.



Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn in one of her Hindu inspired dances



Ruth St. Denis at first wanted to introduce something different to her dance routines, but the influence of Hindu spiritualism and aesthetics was not merely cursory and changed her vision of dance forever. She and her dancer husband Ted Shawn started the Denishawn school of dance teaching her style of dance with its Hindu aesthetic and spiritual influences incorporated into Western dance. The Denishawn School of Dance became the most influential school of modern dance in the US. The idea that dance movements should have emotion as their impetus and dance should evoke emotional and psychological response in the audience is straight from Indian dance metaphysics and the Nāṭyaśāstra. Denis and Shawn taught their students these concepts in their dance school.

Denis' students later were the most influential dancers in Modern dance in the 20th century and some listed below: Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey Charles Weidman, Louis Horst

Significantly, George Balanchine, who founded Contemporary Ballet was influenced heavily by Denis. Thus, we see that the spiritual aesthetic foundational treatise, the Nāṭyaśāstra, which informs every single traditional dance style of India, indeed was directly responsible for the founding of the Modern dance and Contemporary Ballet genres in the US. What started out as learning about Hindu dance metaphysics to enhance her routines turned into a lifelong pursuit; Ruth St. Denis further wanted to explore spirituality and founded the Society of Spiritual Arts. Most biographies and writings about Modern Dance and Contemporary Ballet and Ruth St. Denis fail to mention the Hindu influence on these dances; again, we see the appropriation of Hindu metaphysics and philosophy and subsequent erasure of its monumental contribution to these genres.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal this appropriation that has long been erased and to acknowledge outright the contribution of the Nāṭyaśāstra and Hindu metaphysics to Western dance. Furthermore, the irony is not lost on this author that Indian traditional dancers today are admonished to “reform” Indian traditional dances like Bharatanāṭyam and Odissi by incorporating Western dance techniques. If only those who advocate such topical hybridizations knew how it was Indian traditional dance itself and the Nāṭyaśāstra that reformed and provided the source material to create two major Western dance styles of Modern Dance and Contemporary Ballet and this contribution has never been acknowledged.

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