

Censorship and the Nationalization of Dance in India: An Overview from 1947 to the Present

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Abstract

In this essay, I present a broad overview of the intersections between dance and censorship in independent India. I try to explore the consequent exclusions within the mainstream dance discourse and practices as they were shaped by hegemonic forces of nationalism. I also look at how the changes in instruments and objectives of censorship reflect changing visions of nationalism. This essay broadly examines two major forms of censorship, both of which have been crucial in the appropriation and reconstruction of dance as an integral part of the nationalist cultural identity of India. First, there are the overt forms of censorship, which have been enforced by instruments of state power like legislation and statutory bodies. The post-independence government enacted the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act 1947 and Cinematograph Act 1952 ostensibly for social reform and protection of public morality, but in effect they carried forward socio-political biases of Orientalism and colonialism into the postcolonial project of constructing the Indian imaginary. The process necessitated the elimination of hereditary artist communities and professional women performers (and many of their movement idioms) from mainstream practices of dance, even as their art was decontextualized and reconstructed to suit the officially sanctified high culture. This mode of erasure also influenced popular forms of dance, especially those appearing in Indian cinema, by inscribing them with nationalist notions of womanhood, sexuality, and, more recently, religious majoritarianism. Second, I trace the covert operation of censorship, in which state institutions play a key role in the support and promotion of art. Through selective funding and promotion, conferring privileging labels like “classical,” and presiding over the formalization and classicization of dance, these institutions helped fit dance practices within the nationalist framework of a normative Indian cultural identity that is predominantly Hindu and rahminical. This process resulted in hierarchization, stigmatization, and even omission of certain dance practices, some of which I have highlighted in this essay. The sustained influence of direct and indirect modes of censorship created standardized codes of aesthetics and performance practices, contributing to a chilling effect and leading practitioners to censor themselves. Finally, I argue that the centrality of dance in the national cultural discourse enabled its

use as propaganda to censor negative actions or perceptions about the government. The phenomenon, which may be described as artwashing, has become increasingly prominent in the contemporary context of Hindu majoritarian nationalism seeking to launder its exclusionary tendencies in the process of redefining Indian cultural identity on its terms. Thus, I argue that censorship in the domain of dance has played not just a repressive role but also a productive role by enabling discourses of nationalism. It has acted as a tool of governmentality, by which nationalist ideologies have been established and reinforced to public, such that they are no longer confined to the sphere of the state but have percolated down to the conduct of individuals.

Key Words

Dance, censorship, classical dance, nationalism, cultural identity, Hindu majoritarianism, devadasi, tawaif, Devadasi Act, Cinematograph Act, CBFC, cultural appropriation, governmentality, artwashing, pre-censorship, self-censorship.

Introduction

In this essay, I present a broad overview of the intersections between dance and censorship in independent India and the consequent exclusions within mainstream dance discourse as it was and continues to be framed by hegemonic forces of nationalism. I also explore, through an analysis of the changing instruments and objects of censorship, how such interventions reflect shifting visions of nationalism.

As an official representative of India’s identity and culture, dance makes a statement like little else. It did so way back in 1953, when the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru established a Folk Dance Festival as part of Republic Day celebrations. Seventy years on, dance still takes pride of place on national and international platforms, crowding out programs to celebrate the 75th anniversary of India’s Independence and even the 2023 G20 summit hosted by New Delhi. Dance symbolizes the richness and diversity of India’s culture, heritage, and antiquity, so much so that it is a critical component of the country’s soft power and widely recognized as a significant part of the global cultural capital.¹



[Figure 1] A cordon of dancers welcomes the then U.S. President Donald Trump, seen with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, at Ahmedabad airport in 2020 (official White House photo, Shea Craighead/ Wikimedia Commons).

The narrative of dance—especially “classical” dance—as a symbol of India’s cultural identity did not arise organically. Rather, it developed through a deliberate process of construction and elimination shaped by the forces of nationalism. These forces led to the “invention of a tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger)—the crucible in which ritual and community dance practices were decontextualized, reconstructed, and sanctified as national dance traditions. The dregs in the crucible—indigenous and popular performers and hereditary artist communities—were either marginalized or eliminated from the mainstream discourse. While several studies have analyzed the constitutive aspects of this process,² this essay focuses on the silences and exclusions embedded in it. The silences and exclusions, I argue, are a function of censorship, which has operated in various forms to chisel the narrative around dance.

The play of these forces in the creative sector is especially significant in a postcolonial state like India. While print-capitalism provided a space for the development of colonial-era nationalism,³ the realm of visual vocabularies⁴—including dance—provided another rich space in which the postcolonial Indian imaginary could be shaped. Looking at this process through the lens of censorship throws light on how the discourse of dance has developed into an integral part of India’s postcolonial cultural identity based on silences and marginalizations.

Drawing upon Butler’s concept of censorship as a

² Scholars like Allen, Bakhle, Lopez y Royo, Meduri, Morcom (“Indian Popular Culture”), Oldenburg (The Making of Colonial Lucknow), Soneji (“Living History, Performing Memory” and Unfinished Gestures),

³ Here I draw on Benedict Anderson’s suggestion that print-capitalism provided a new institutional space for the development of the modern “national” language.

⁴ Freitag discusses the significance of the visual realm as a building block in shaping nationalism. She identifies three areas in which “visual images are the shapers and bearers of thought”—South Asian courtly culture, religious practices, and live performance traditions. Note that dance is an important aspect of all three realms.

productive form of power (Butler 132) central to the establishment of a nation-state, this essay examines censorship in India as a formative tool to redeploy dance to serve the nation-state. This idea is also echoed in Kuhn, who did not subscribe to the “prohibition model” of censorship as it “isolates censorship practices from their broader social and historical conditions of existence and effectivity” and makes one forget that “censorship might equally well be productive in its effects” (Kuhn 4-5).

In India, censorship is largely the prerogative of the government, which has used various instruments at its disposal to restrict or suppress dance practices that were contrary to its aims and policies. I look at instances of dance censorship from 1947 till the present and examine how they led to the suppression or marginalization of certain practices, communities, or ideas that were not aligned with the forces of national identity formation and consolidation. Further, through Foucault’s framework of governmentality, I argue that the intersections between censorship and dance illustrate the exercise of state power as a “conduct of conducts”—a control over artists—in order to facilitate the project of nationalism (Walters 11).

I have tried to delve into direct and indirect modes of dance censorship. The first section of the essay traces the direct forms, which have operated through state instruments like legislation and statutory bodies to ban the devadasi practice and enable the policing of culture by monitoring representation of dance in movies. The second section examines indirect forms of censorship, which have operated through state institutions that support and promote art: soft censorship, pre-censorship, and artwashing. While these are broad distinctions, there are overlaps between them, with instances of one form of censorship feeding into another.

Not only have these interventions shaped dance practices according to nationalist prerogatives, but also they have served to guide national narratives and nudge public opinion in a certain direction. In this context, I argue, the changing methods and objectives of censorship broadly reflect changes in the dominant vision of nationalism from postcolonialism and Nehruvian pluralism to Hindu majoritarianism.

I. Direct Censorship

a. Legislation for Social Reform

The redeployment of popular performance traditions to serve a nationalist narrative entailed a reconstruction of not just performances but the performers themselves. Very few of the mainstream dance practitioners we see today belong to the lineage of professional women performers or hereditary artist communities, who used to be central to performance practices in the subcontinent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chakravorty, Walker, Morcom, Oldenburg, Srinivasan, Soneji, and many others have traced how these communities were increasingly marginalized in colonial India, first by dwindling patronage and social acceptance and then by the nationalist and social-reformist narratives equating them with “prostitutes” and seeking to end their “exploitation.” It was in this context that legislation like Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 provided state sanction to the marginalization of hereditary dancer communities and paved the way for the appropriation of their art to serve the nation-state.

The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, passed just two months after India’s Independence in 1947, was the culmination of a two-decade-long effort to ban the dedication of girls to temples. The Act aimed to bring about “social reform” by ending a system in which “innocent children of a certain caste or community are trained to become proficient in all the arts of solicitation that they become captives to vice” (Devika 93). In effect it ended up censoring entire communities of women performers by criminalizing their livelihood and ostracizing them socially. These women performers, who occupied a liminal space outside the conventional socio-sexual boundaries, could not be contained within the nationalist ideological framework that predicated its sovereignty on the sphere of the family (Chatterjee 237–40) and in women as upholders of respectability, tradition, and cultural identity. The nationalist appropriation of dance, therefore, required the elimination of practitioners like devadasis, *tawaifs*, and *baijis*. The mainstream dance community was repopulated mostly by educated women hailing from upper-caste and upper-class Hindu backgrounds, symbolized by the entry of figures like Rukmini Devi and Madame Menaka on the national stage. They were sanctified as “artistes” and “classical dancers,” while the traditional practitioners of the art were delegitimized and downgraded as entertainers or sex workers.



[Figure 2] A nautch performance in India, 1860–70 (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies and Leiden University Library/Wikimedia Commons). The anti-nautch campaign began in the late 19th century.

The Madras Devadasi Act was ostensibly a postcolonial social reform that served the nationalist cause of cultural revivalism. In practice, it carried forward colonial and Victorian biases into the postcolonial cultural imaginary. These biases were perpetuated by The Cantonment Act (1864) and Contagious Diseases Act (1868), which sought to regulate prostitution in British India and ended up equating courtesans with prostitutes. Even as the anti-nautch movement gained momentum, the courtesan community was harassed and taxed heavily by the British because they did not fit easily into their social and administrative frameworks.⁵

Neither were they a natural ally of the nationalists, who saw them as morally questionable and socially transgressive.⁶ All these factors fueled the nationalist project to eliminate courtesans from the cultural discourse, culminating in legislation like the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982, and Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1988.

While the courtesan community was erased from mainstream culture, excluded even from institutions like All India Radio⁷, the women themselves could hardly disappear. Stripped of their means of livelihood and

ostracized by society, they took up alternative professions or identities. Some joined the film industry, downplaying their lineage, while others got married and integrated themselves with upper-caste or middle-class norms of domesticity. In mainstream society, professional women performers were pushed to the margins of respectability and deemed vulgar and inferior entertainers. A significant number faced increasing poverty and became sex workers (Walker 95).⁸

Despite the institutionalized sexual exploitation of the poorest sections of society, the enabling conditions of caste, religion, patriarchy, and poverty have kept devadasi practice very much alive.⁹ Yet official data does not account for the numbers of women engaged in it. Devadasis have been erased from official discourses to the extent that the government barely recognizes their existence in contemporary India. In some instances, when commercial women performers do enter the mainstream discourse, they are usually objects of contempt or degeneration. Take *lavani* dancers, for example. In 1948, the chief minister of Maharashtra banned *lavani* performances in Bombay because the form was considered inappropriate. The ban was lifted on the condition that obscene lyrics and dance movements would be “cleaned up,” and legal and quasi-legal bodies were formed in Maharashtra to sanitize the performances (Singh). *Lavani* is still popular in rural areas of Maharashtra and often feature in political events, but the notion that it is “uncivilized” and “vulgar” continues to be perpetuated, sometimes by performers themselves. In February 2023, a prominent NCP leader told party members to stop organizing “raunchy performances” in the name of *lavani*. This followed a complaint by one *lavani* dancer against another for allegedly degrading the dance by using DJs and obscene performances (Yadav, “Explained”).



Figure 3] A lavani performance in Delhi (Ramesh Lalwani/Wikimedia Commons). Lavani was recently in the news, with a Maharashtra politician condemning the “degradation” of the dance form.

The narrative of censure against the cultural labor of women performers has surfaced even in the realm of the judiciary, an example being the court ban on bar dancers in Mumbai in 2005. The Maharashtra government’s arguments seeking the ban were in fact the same as those used in the campaign against *tawaifs* and devadasis a century ago. The ban affected around 75,000 performers, of whom a big majority were hereditary artists from several tribes across India (Morcom, “Indian Popular Culture”).

Thus, state intervention aimed at social reform served to censor professional dancers and hereditary artist communities from the national cultural discourse. This censorship played a productive role—to produce an idea of the quintessential Indian dancer, who was the artistic counterpart of the paradigmatic Indian woman representing the spiritually superior and culturally autonomous domain of national identity.¹⁰ This project played out not just on stage but also on the screen. The following section traces how dance censorship served nationalist movements through the medium of cinema.

b. Legislation for Protection of Public Morality

Cinema may have remained outside the ambit of high culture for decades, but the industry had already acquired a mass presence by the mid-1940s (Majumdar

5 In terms of their social roles, courtesans were the antithesis of Victorian domestic morality and viewed as an immoral influence in the context of rising prostitution. In administrative terms, they were classified as “singing and dancing girls,” taxed heavily, and harassed for lending support to anti-British activities. For more details, see Oldenburg (“Lifestyle as Resistance” 259–87).

6 See Chakravorty (“The Tawaif and the Item Girl”) and Oldenburg (“Lifestyle as Resistance”).

7 In 1954, the then Broadcasting Minister B.V. Keskar said that they would not hire any woman “whose private life is a public scandal.” See Morcom (*Illicit Worlds* 176).

8 The practice of dedicating girls to temples is officially prohibited but the practice still exists in parts of India. Torri discusses the conditions in which present-day devadasis live.

9 The official ban on devadasis has resulted in lack of data on the prevalence of the practice. In 2011, the National Commission for Women estimated that there were 48,358 devadasis in India. However, a 2015 report by Sampark Data Center submitted to the International Labour Organization estimates that the number was actually around 450,000. See Kothari, Ganesan, and Jayalakshmi.

10 Here I refer to Chatterjee’s framework of the material/spiritual distinction in the discourse of nationalism. See also Chatterjee, Sangari, and Vaid.

9) and the leaders of newly independent India could not ignore its impact on society. One of the foremost planes of interaction between the state and cinema was censorship. The Cinematograph Act of 1952 (which again had a colonial precedent—the Cinematograph Act of 1918) gave the government the authority to constitute the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in order to “raise the standard of films as a medium of education and healthy entertainment” and serve the project of nationalism (Bhowmik 70).¹¹

Bhowmik and Mehta among others have discussed the centrality of sexuality in post-independence film censorship, and how it was particularly telling in its attempts to “protect” Indian culture by embodying the ideal Indian womanhood on screen. As Mehta explains, “female sexuality is fundamentally tied to notions of being Indian,” and censorship has been “central to clarifying conceptions of the state, democracy, and liberalism” and the “(re)production of the state” (Mehta 21). Much of this censorship was and continues to be centered on song-and-dance sequences. An early example is the call to delete the “jerking of bust in close-up by one of the dancers” in the 1953 Telugu film *Prapancham* (*Journal of the Film Industry*, June 1954). Interventions like this reinforced the notion of the quintessential Indian woman as *sanskaari* (cultured), refined, and chaste; and reproduced dichotomies such as heroine/vamp and wife/courtesan, mirroring portrayals of women in “classical” dance from the *ashatanyika* (eight types of heroines as classified in *Natya Shastra*) to contemporary depictions of “saintly sinners.”¹²

Thus, as Mehta shows, the “practice of censorship reveals informal pacts between the Indian state, the Bombay film industry, and indigenous patriarchy” (22), which served to further entrench the gendered idea of nationhood. Even decades later, song-and-dance sequences such as “Choli ke Peechey” (*Khalnayak*, 1993), “Sexy, Sexy, Sexy, Mujhe Log Bole” (*Khuddar*, 1993), and “Meri Pant Bhi Sexy” (*Dulaara*, 1993) were censored as obscene (Ghosh 566–69). The “vulgarity” in these sequences was condemned by government bodies such as the CBFC, National Human Rights Commission, National Commission for Women, and a Parliamentary Standing Committee; and led to a revision in CBFC guidelines listing “objectionable visuals” (Ghosh 566–69).

It is worth noting here that the furor against “Choli ke Peechey” was led not by any state body but by political organizations like the Shiv Sena, a right-leaning party, and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the Hindu nationalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). On the one hand, this signified the diffusion of nationalistic censorship. On the other hand, it marked a shift in the focus of censorship, parallel to the mobilization of Hindu nationalist outfits and electoral successes of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 1990s. The appropriation of cinema to disseminate Hindutva narratives became all the more conspicuous in the BJP’s and Shiv Sena’s 1993 campaign against Hindi films, boycotting Pakistani-origin stars and “anti-national” actors for attending Pakistan Day celebrations (Ghosh 566–69).

With globalization and liberalization of the Indian economy gathering pace on the one hand and Hindutva nationalism gaining momentum on the other, the 1990s marked increasing tussles over the prevailing assumptions of Indian cultural identity. In the context of cinema, this project played out in efforts to censor dance sequences. For example, Hindutva groups wrote to the CBFC in 2019 against the title song of the film *Dabangg 3*. Outfits like Hindu Janajagruiti Samiti claimed that the song hurt Hindu sentiments by portraying *sadhus* dancing and playing the guitar. #BoycottDabangg3 trended for a while, asking Hindus to boycott the film. Under pressure, the filmmakers voluntarily removed certain scenes from the sequence for the song “Dabangg 3.”

In another instance in 2023, a saffron bikini sported by Deepika Padukone in the song “Besharam Rang” from *Pathaan* raised a furor. Calls for boycott and censorship did the rounds, with Hindutva groups and state ministers claiming that the visuals were “vulgar,” and that the gerua (saffron, the color of Hindu ascetics’ robes, and dominant color of the BJP flag) bathing suit was an attack on the Hindu religion, and, by implication, the BJP. Following CBFC intervention, some sensual dance movements were edited out of “Besharam Rang” but the orange bikini was retained (“Deepika Padukone’s Orange Bikini”). These calls for censorship served to bring Hindutva indignation to the fore, contributing to religious polarization of national cultural discourse.

It seems here that the purpose of censorship is not so

much to change or reshape dance practices per se, but rather to use film dance to assert and propagate the discourse of Hindutva nationalism. As a mass medium with global cultural influence, films offer a rich arena for production and perpetuation of narratives, which in recent years increasingly reflect the Hindutva vision of nationalism.¹³ Following Butler’s approach, this illustrates the role of censorship as not just repressive but a productive form of political power.

Hindi cinema gained cultural legitimacy only since the 1990s (Morcom, *Illicit Worlds* 21). By then, the “classical” and “folk” dances had already been sanctified and institutionalized as national cultural capital under the influence of indirect censorship. The next section explores how non-coercive methods nudged performers and the art market into adapting to nationalistic ideologies and, in the process, shaping dance practices to serve the nation-state.

II. Indirect Censorship

a. Institutionalization

The restructuring of indigenous dance traditions as nationalized performing arts entailed not just the marginalization of traditional practitioners but also a separation between the utilitarian and artistic aspects of dance. This made the dance arts heavily dependent on the government—which assumed the role of chief patron of the arts in independent India—for funding and favor (Cherian, Erdman). For the leaders of the newly independent India, who were seeking to establish a unified identity for the postcolonial Indian imaginary, dance provided a ready arena through which to reinforce markers of cultural identity such as language, caste, religion, and morality. The dances, particularly the “classical” forms, thus came to symbolize a classical past, an “ancient golden age,” and served to bolster the narrative of a unified high culture and history of India. This meant Sanskritizing dance by inscribing it with the character of Hinduism, particularly Brahminism, spirituality, and refinement.¹⁴

The role of state institutions in this restructuring of dance has been extensively documented (Chakravorty, “Hegemony, Dance and Nation” and “From Interculturalism to Historicism”; Cherian; Walker; among others). Opening dance academies at national and state levels; branding of dance forms as “classical,” “folk,” and “tribal”; creating an institutional pedagogy; codifying and textualizing movement practices are some of the key instruments the state actors deployed in this process. While these institutions played

a productive role in building this discourse of dance, this section highlights the restrictions, modifications, and exclusions embedded in the process. These restrictive codes operated in the form of covert or soft censorship, by which indirect pressure was applied to influence dance practices and gradually guide or manipulate public preference and expression. This pressure took the form of selective disbursement of funds and opportunities, limiting, or discouraging access and shaping aesthetic and artistic standards. The following examples illustrate how soft censorship is reflected in the present repertoire, movement vocabulary, stagecraft, and costumes, especially in the “classical” dances.

Consider the current form of bharatanatyam, popularly recognized as the “oldest” dance form of India with “divine” origins in the dance of Shiva and a 2000-year-old unbroken history. This conception has been shaped over the past century by forces ranging from Orientalism, Theosophy, and anti-nautch to anti-colonialism, cultural revivalism, and postcolonial nationalism—all of which have fed into institutional censorship of bharatanatyam. In the 1940s, for example, the Madras Academy spoke of jettisoning “unsastraic mudras” and “unsuitable” *padams* (Subramaniam 135). This carried forward anti-nautch and cultural revivalist efforts to dissociate dance from nautch—which included replacing erotic elements with the divine and drawing deliberate connections with the *shastras* (Sanskrit treatises) and temple sculptures to “refine” the form—and make it suitable for the new urban, upper-caste, and elite audiences and patrons.

Post-independence, bharatanatyam received state recognition as “classical.” As such, it was the beneficiary of government funds and performance opportunities on the one hand, and the object of classicizing and Sanskritizing influences by patron institutions on the other (Chakravorty, “Hegemony, Dance and Nation”; Harp; Coorlawala, “The Sanskritized Body”; Meduri; Walker). As a consequence, the sensual and sexual gestures of devadasis were replaced by more austere and abstract material drawn from the *Natya Shastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* (now considered foundational texts for bharatanatyam practitioners). Erotic *javalis* from the devadasi repertoire were replaced by devotional *kritis*. Storytelling aspects became secondary to technical perfection and complicated rhythmic sequences. References to patrons in *sadir* compositions were replaced by references to gods. Preference was given to Sanskrit and classical Tamil compositions, over other institutional languages in the repertoire. Compositions with references

¹¹ Chakravarty lists the planes of interaction between the government and film industry: film festivals and film institutes set up by the government; taxation in the state-government domain; and censorship in the central-government domain, exercised through the Cinematograph Act. This essay focuses on the role of censorship in furthering nationalist projects.

¹² See Nijhawan for an analysis on how popular Hindi cinema mirrors nationalist myths of dancing women, apsaras and devadasis.

¹³ This trend is evident in the recent proliferation of movies like *Bajirao Mastani*, *Padmaavat*, *Manikarnika*, *Kashmir Files*, *Ram Setu*, *Pathaan*, and *Adipurush*, which align with Hindu right-wing narratives.

¹⁴ Here I use M. N. Srinivas’s concept as explained by Coorlawala (“Classical and Contemporary Indian Dance”).

to religions other than Hinduism were jettisoned. All this fed into the narrative of bharamatyam as a sacred and spiritual practice with roots in an ancient brahminical golden age.

Similar exclusions are embedded in the modern form of kathak, another “classical” dance form. Several strands of cultural practices of *kathaks* (Walker 35) from various parts of north India were homogenized to create a seamless narrative of the “classical” kathak within the nationalist cultural framework, but which excluded the contributions of *tawaifs*, Vaishnavite women, and Muslim courts in the kathak tradition (Chakravorty, “Hegemony, Dance and Nation” 118). The institutionalization and codification of kathak resulted in educated and upper-middle-class teachers and practitioners entering the field, excluding the *gharanedar* artists (those coming from an artistic lineage); courtesans; and Muslim dancers, teachers, and musicians (Allen 69). Walker traces how the new profile of practitioners and patrons resulted in gentrification and Sanskritization of the dance form, which was reinforced by formalization of the choreographic vocabulary and repertoire and sanctified through grants and opportunities. This hegemonic influence affected various aspects of dance practices. For example, the *sarangi* was jettisoned because of its perceived association with the *kothi*. Gestures like biting the lips or raising the eyebrows were dropped, and choreographies shifted towards devotional interpretations of poetic material. Compositions like *salami* were removed from the repertoire because of courtly and Muslim associations, and Hindu mythological themes were highlighted instead.

The notion of *Bharatiya sanskaar* (Indian culture) and *auchitya* (appropriateness) of a dancer was centered not just on her movements but also her appearance. Even today, specific costumes are associated with specific dance forms, and a deviation from these conventions sparks outrage. For example, a woman dancing without an *odhni* (a piece of fabric worn over the chest, covering the blouse, and considered a symbol of the woman’s virtue) is deemed vulgar and inappropriate. In 2005, an odissi performance by Ramli Ibrahim’s dance company in Bhubaneswar was criticized as “undignified” and “inauthentic” because it featured women dancing without an *odhni*. The allegations of inauthenticity are, however, questionable. In the 1950s and 1960s, odissi dancers like Ritha Devi and Indrani Rahman were dancing without an *odhni* (Sikand 49–65). Several

dancers in ancient temple sculptures are depicted as even more “skimpily” clad. It is worth noting that the critics of the Ibrahim show included odissi gurus and connoisseurs, which point towards an internalization of the sanitizing and Sanskritizing influences of the preceding decades. These influences are actively reinforced by state institutions even today. In 2013, Kathak Kendra frowned upon a dancer without an *odhni*, asserting, “Kathak dance has a classical dress code like all other dance forms. That is the first identity of any classical form.”¹⁵

The above instances provide a broad overview of indirect censorship of dance by the state by means of economic or political incentives and controlling access. These may be considered as soft censorship, which is becoming increasingly prevalent globally as greater domestic and international exposure of governments increases the costs of direct censorship. As a less visible but equally effective method of control and suppression, soft censorship in dance is thus a significant window into contemporary mechanisms of cultural reconfiguration by the Indian nation-state. The following section provides an overview of self-censorship and pre-censorship as further examples of soft censorship.

b. Self-censorship and Pre-censorship

The consolidation of certain standards and aesthetics in the field of dance through the 20th century, and the accompanying exclusions, have had a chilling impact on contrary practices. As a result, practitioners have tended to censor such practices themselves, in effect becoming willing participants in the hegemonic discourses that led to the censorship in the first place.

Self-censorship is the act of censoring or repressing one’s own expression to conform to a particular thought regime. Therefore, by definition, evidence of self-censorship in dance is hard to come by. Anecdotal evidence is, however, available. After a recent performance in Delhi, I heard a “classical” dancer rue that while she had revived the dance of courtesans, she had had to sanitize the choreography to make it “suitable” for the present audience.

Such tastes and preferences in dance have been inculcated through sustained acculturation, resulting in, for example, interpretation of *shringara* (love) only as divine love and censoring the erotic kind. Therefore, one

finds a proliferation of compositions exploring *vipralambha shringara* and very few of *sambhoga shringara*.¹⁶ Kelucharan Mahapatra desisted from teaching Jayadeva’s erotic composition *Kuru Yadunandana* for a long time, saying that it would be unsuitable for his students, given their urban and upper-class backgrounds. He finally choreographed it in 1967 for Sonal Mansingh, saying that she was bold enough to dance it. Sharmila Mukherjee, another student of Kelucharan Mahapatra, said, “Our version of Jayadeva’s *Kuru Yadunandana* is quite explicit. I remember guruji would tell me he can’t teach me the piece until I’m married!” (Nathan, “In the Memory of Her Guru”).

Instances of self-censorship go further back. Madame Menaka, who symbolized the entry of upper-caste, educated women on the public stage in the 1920s, dropped the *sarangi* from her ensemble because the sound reminded her of the *kothi*. It was a conscious dissociation of her dance from the courtly connections of kathak. Descendants of *tawaifs* were not allowed in her dance troupe or to even teach at her school. Menaka’s disciple Damayanti Joshi would not perform expressive material in a seated position, which was considered typical of courtesans (Walker 120). Many dancers today omit the overtly courtly repertoire, particularly the *salami*, and instead highlight the Hindu devotional aspects of the dance (Walker 97). These erasures also tie in with the earlier-mentioned instance of one *lavani* dancer censoring another, eventually leading to a warning by a political leader.



[Figure 4] The Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, hosts a classical dance festival on the eve of Mahashivaratri. Other temple sites like Khajuraho and Konark also host classical dance festivals organized by the

government (Vasanthan Rajendran/Wikimedia Commons). This is visible even in the biggest dance festivals of India. Usually backed by the government, they are organized in the backdrop of temples and thematically mirror the nationalist construction of dance as the apotheosis of Indian culture, religion, and womanhood. The government’s cultural extravaganza celebrating 75 years of independence (Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav) gives precedence to topics like *viranganas* (women warriors), themes from Hindu myths and epics and bhakti rather than contemporary social issues, popular performance traditions, and overt sensuality. Dancers who do not fit the dominant mold of “Indianness” or “tradition” are lumped together in categories like “contemporary” or “modern,” which do not receive the same government funding and opportunities as those in the “classical” mold.¹⁷ The aforementioned factors have all facilitated self-censorship, nudging dance practices to conform to state-sanctioned standards and push the dominant nationalist vision.

The Sanskritized character and brahminical aesthetics of mainstream dance, especially “classical dance,” made it a fertile ground to reinforce exclusionary narratives of Hindu majoritarian nationalism.¹⁸ This is especially evident in contemporary instances of pre-censorship, which amount to prior restraint or restriction of freedom of expression with the explicit or implicit backing of the state. These instances, exemplified by patterns of curation of performers, locations, themes, and content, appear to be less concerned with the dance practices themselves, but rather seek to use the domain of dance to suppress certain voices and strengthen the discourse of Hindutva nationalism.

In January 2023, Mallika Sarabhai had to shift her performance outside Warangal’s Ramappa Temple in Telangana after the union culture minister reportedly denied permission for the show inside its premises (“Culture Minister Denied Permission”). The incident came a week after Sarabhai voiced concerns over the “complete destruction of ideals” in the country and how “Hindutva was being shoved” down the people’s throats. Incidentally, Ramappa Temple was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2021, an event that was celebrated by the government and even Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In March 2022, Mansiya V. P. and Soumya Sukumaran were not allowed to perform at Koodalmanikyam temple in Kerala’s Thrissur district because they were not Hindu (Modak, “Three Hindu Dancers”). The temple is considered

¹⁵ Here I refer to a 2013 episode when Aditi Mangaldas declined a Sangeet Natak Akademi award, saying the institution had misclassified her work in kathak as “Creative and Experimental Dance” instead of “classical.” She pointed out an “authoritarian decree” under which a dancer had to change her publicity material as it portrayed her without a dupatta, thus sparking a heated debate on the dupatta’s place in kathak. The detailed correspondence is available at <https://narthaki.com/info/rt/rt53.html>. Accessed on 7 April 2023.

¹⁶ *Shringara*, one of *navarasa* or nine rasas, is the emotion of romantic love. It has two aspects—*sambhoga shringara*, where the couple is together or united, and *vipralambha shringara*, where they are apart. Intense and erotic desire for the lover is conveyed through *sambhoga*.

¹⁷ See Sarkar Muni.

¹⁸ Drawing on Chatterji, Blom, Hansen, and Jaffrelot; see also McDonald.

the only one in India dedicated to Bharath, the younger brother of Rama—incidentally, the central figure in the Hindutva discourse.

In August 2022, the New York-based Indo-American Arts Council took Ananya Dance Theatre's *Nūn Gherāo: Surrounded by Salt* off the Erasing Borders Dance Festival lineup. The show, which explores themes of casteism and forced migration, was ostensibly cancelled by the council as it "did not meet the call for submission criteria for the Festival of India@75" (Regan, "Ananya Dance Theatre").

The suppression of artistic works exploring casteism, forced migration, and religious exclusion point to the redeployment of dance censorship to produce and perpetuate the narratives of Hindu nationalism. In Foucauldian terms, the combination of pre-censorship and self-censorship appears to be part of a project of governmentality to redefine national cultural identity through a system in which individuals and groups shape their own behavior. In other words, tools like pre-censorship and self-censorship enable the nation-state to exercise power and disseminate its narratives through the "conduct of conducts" (Walters 11).

c. Artwashing

While governmentality has always existed in the appropriation of dance by Indian nationalist narratives, the modes of employment have differed along with the changing visions of nationalism. While the first decades after independence used censorship to appropriate dance to build the postcolonial cultural identity of India, the present decade has witnessed the indirect use of state power in the domain of dance to censor other activities or issues. This recent phenomenon may be described as artwashing, which is the use of art to distract from negative actions of an organization and sanitize its public image.

In the context of India, artwashing may be considered a form of soft power that uses dance as propaganda to sanitize the image of the government. In fact, artwashing has become increasingly prominent as the Hindutva brand of nationalism seeks to establish its vision of Indian culture through the power of cultural representation. Dance, as a major component of India's cultural capital, has therefore been appropriated in the artwashing efforts of the state.

This process has operated on two fronts. First, on the domestic front, artwashing may be considered to be aimed at improving the ruling party's political image and electoral prospects. Over the past decade, the central government has been especially vocal about its efforts to boost cultural diversity and inclusivity, even as it enacts exclusionary and polarizing policies (Prakash "India's Cultural Pride"; Chakravorti, "Reluctant Inclusionist"). To counteract criticism, the state has nominated Dalit artists to high government positions (Mandal, "Rajya Sabha"), instituted "People's Padma" (Menon, "People's Padma"), recognized *unsung* art forms ("Sursingar, Karakattam, and Others"), and organized an exhibition of works by prominent artists to celebrate the Prime Minister's radio address *Mann Ki Baat* (Kalra, "Mann ki Art").

However, some of these initiatives are tokenistic and serve to deflect attention from reports of inequality, repression, or discrimination at the grassroots. For example, the 2018 Padma Shri award given to Sitavva Jodatti, a *devadasi*, was lauded as a progressive move. However, four years later, Sitavva Jodatti felt compelled to stage a protest against the meager government pension for *devadasis* (Uppar, "Padma Awardee Protests"). Padma Shris given to Manjamma Jogathi and Rani Machaiah were seen to foreground lesser known "folk" dance forms, but the awards have not led to any direct improvement in the lives of community dancers, nor have they highlighted the challenges faced by them on a larger stage. Active government intervention led to the UNESCO recognition of *kalbeliya* as intangible cultural heritage in 2010, but the practitioners are yet to see the consequent benefits (Joncheere).

Even dancers from the more privileged "classical" streams, who have represented India at international events, were served eviction notices in Delhi and made to scramble for accommodation (Shekhar, "We Are in the Dark"). The performing arts remain mostly in the unorganized sector and the proportion of artists empaneled with government institutes is minuscule. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the arts was one of the worst affected sectors and received negligible institutional support.¹⁹ The mainstream media highlights the government's narrative of "building cultural infrastructure" ("Govt Continuously Working to Preserve") and indirectly provides political and electoral mileage to the party in power. One may look at all of these instances within the framework of artwashing—the use of art to manufacture an image or perception

of cultural inclusivity that leads to the eventual "pricing out" or censoring of certain communities. Artwashing plays a similar role on the international front, as the Indian government uses art to sanitize its image as an inclusive democracy even as it faces consistent downgrading in global indexes on democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights (Krishnankutty, "Freedom 'Losing Ground'"). The government's recent promotion of tribal art at international meetings, celebration of the global impact of Indian art, and prominence of dance at high-level events²⁰ may be seen as virtue signaling through art. While at the macro level the foregrounding of cultural diversity diverts attention from the polarizing and discriminatory aspects of Hindu nationalism, at the micro level, it obscures the expression of marginalized and dissident groups. This coopting of art serves to redefine national identity as Hindu *rashtra* (nation), as conceptualized by Hindu majoritarian nationalism, and any artistic expression outside its normative boundaries may be deemed "anti-national." This expression may be considered "impossible speech," which, for Butler, is that which is socially unacceptable to say and renders the speaker "asocial" or "psychotic" in society (Butler 133).

Conclusion

I have attempted to show how these instances of excisions, elisions, suppressions, and omissions have "produced" dance in independent India. Throughout, they have been informed by the underlying discourses of nationalism, which have shaped and used them as a tool of governmentality.

The essay has analyzed the effects of explicit and implicit modes of censorship in the field of dance, all of which have served to "invent a tradition" to serve the needs of the nation-state. This process has worked along the lines of gender, caste, religion, and class to map out legitimate and illegitimate zones of the performing arts that persist till today.

I have also examined how different methods of censorship have catered to evolving brands of nationalism over the seven decades since independence. Further, I have tried to show how state mechanisms have seeped into the consciousness of the Indian polity and society at large, to the point that they constitute a system in which individuals and groups are willing stakeholders in the perpetuation of the discourse of the nation-state.

In the context of a global trend towards autocratization of governments and backsliding of freedom of expression, the study of censorship as a quiet, ubiquitous, and productive force of power is increasingly relevant. It also remains to be

seen whether these trends can be disrupted, subverted, or metamorphosed by the internet or the entry of major private players in the world of art in India.

¹⁹ See for instance, Ratnam ("Anita Says..."); Sethi ("Revival Package for the Arts?"); Korgaonkar ("Lavani Performers"); Sarukkai ("Classical Arts Must Be Authentic"); Arora ("Aditi Mangaldas").

²⁰ See "9 Years of PM Modi"; "Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi"; "Watch: G20 Delegates".

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