

Sound and Sovereignty: The Political Role of Music and Dance from Ancient Courts to Contemporary India

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Abstract

This paper explores the enduring relationship between performance arts and political authority in India from ancient to contemporary times. It analyzes how music and dance were more than aesthetic pursuits; they were vital instruments in the consolidation and expression of sovereignty. From the courts of the Maurya, Gupta, and Vijayanagara empires to the modern Indian republic, rulers and governments have harnessed the emotive and symbolic power of performance to shape public memory, religious legitimacy, and national identity. While in ancient India, royal courts and temples hosted performances that emphasized cosmic order and divine right, the postcolonial state has employed music and dance to forge unity, project soft power, and reinforce cultural nationalism. Classical traditions such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Odissi have been redefined as national symbols, while folk performances serve both as instruments of cultural inclusion and as contested sites of regional identity. In the 21st century, debates over authenticity, appropriation, and representation reveal how deeply intertwined performance remains with the politics of identity. This paper argues that the Indian state's relationship with music and dance has not only evolved but also continuously mirrors its ideological aspirations, whether imperial, nationalist, or diplomatic.

Key words - Music and power, classical dance, cultural nationalism, Indian history, performance and politics, cultural diplomacy, postcolonial identity.

1. Introduction

The sound of a veena echoing through temple corridors or the rhythmic footwork of a dancer in a palace court is not merely a sensory delight—it is a symbolic act of political and spiritual expression. In India, where religion, art, and statecraft have historically coalesced, music and dance have played a crucial role in articulating authority, shaping social identities, and mobilizing collective emotion. These art forms have been mobilized not just to entertain, but to consecrate power, assert moral order, and define national or dynastic boundaries.

Performance, particularly in the form of music and dance, functioned as a vital medium through which kings and emperors projected divine legitimacy, celebrated conquests, and maintained ritualized control over their subjects. Unlike the written word, the performative was immediate, emotionally resonant, and capable of forging collective memory. Temples and courts served as both sacred and civic theatres where this symbolic power was enacted. The continuity of this performative-political nexus is striking when one observes its adaptation in modern India, where democratic institutions have adopted the visual grammar of the past to assert secular, multicultural identity while often relying on ancient symbols to define civilizational pride.

This paper seeks to trace the evolution of these traditions, examining how ancient kings used them to solidify rule, how postcolonial governments reconfigured them for nation-building, and how contemporary India continues to deploy performance as a tool of both cohesion and contestation. It explores the dual role of music and dance: as instruments of state control and as vehicles for resistance and alternative identity formation.

2. Music and Dance as Instruments of Royal Power and Ideology in Ancient India

In ancient India, music and dance were not passive pastimes but critical expressions of cosmological order, royal grandeur, and social hierarchy. The Mauryan empire, under the guidance of treatises like Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, recognized the value of the arts in reinforcing dharma and royal authority. While archaeological and textual evidence is limited for this early period, literary accounts like those of Megasthenes reveal that musical processions and performances were integral to courtly life and royal spectacle. The Gupta period, often called the "Golden Age" of Indian civilization, saw an intensification of court patronage toward classical music and Sanskrit drama. This was the age when the *Natyashastra* gained canonical authority, prescribing music and dance as spiritually sanctioned acts designed to transmit rasa—emotional and ethical experience—to audiences. In this sense, performance became a way to reinforce social harmony and the dharmic order, with kings cast as upholders of both aesthetic and moral balance.

This ideological use of performance found its apex in the Vijayanagara Empire, where temple rituals and royal festivals like Mahanavami combined sacred dance with political spectacle. The devadasi tradition, particularly in temples like those of Hampi, illustrates how the state ritualized performance to display its alignment with divine will. Devadasis, through their daily performances, were part of a broader apparatus of legitimacy, with the king represented as Vishnu or Shiva's earthly avatar. Dancers and musicians in the court were not mere entertainers; they were custodians of cosmic order, whose performances affirmed the ruler's moral and religious stature. Simultaneously, the court's investment in Carnatic music, and Sanskrit and Telugu dramas, served to define the empire as the cultural hegemon of South India. In all these instances, music and dance were used not only to reflect the glory of the king but also to ideologically bind diverse populations through shared aesthetic and ritual experiences.

3. Postcolonial India: Rebuilding Identity Through Culture

With independence in 1947, India faced the monumental task of forging a unified national identity from a landscape fractured by colonial rule, Partition, and immense cultural diversity. Cultural policy became a central tool in this nation-building exercise, and music and dance were at the forefront. The early Nehruvian state established institutions such as The Sangeet Natak Akademi (1953), The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), and later The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), to preserve, promote, and reinterpret India's classical and folk traditions. These institutions institutionalized art forms once confined to temples and courts and redefined them as emblems of national heritage. Bharatanatyam, for example, once associated with the stigmatized devadasi system, was reimagined as a symbol of India's timeless spiritual culture. Similar trajectories can be seen with Kathak and Odissi,

which underwent codification and state-sponsored revival, gaining respectability and prominence as “classical” forms.

Postcolonial India thus used performance not only to articulate cultural pride but also to rehabilitate traditions marginalized during colonial rule. Government-run media such as All India Radio and Doordarshan became crucial channels for disseminating these redefined traditions to the masses. Performance was also used as a pedagogical and integrative tool— Republic Day parades, school cultural programs, and national festivals featured regional dances and songs to showcase India’s “unity in diversity.” However, this effort at creating a national culture also involved selectivity, privileging Sanskritic and classical forms over folk or syncretic traditions. While classical dances were elevated to national icons, tribal and subaltern forms often remained underfunded or excluded from the state’s cultural narrative.

4. Contemporary State Patronage and Cultural Diplomacy

In contemporary India, music and dance continue to serve as potent instruments of statecraft, nationalism, and international diplomacy. The state’s role as a patron has grown in complexity, shifting from the preservation of cultural heritage to the strategic deployment of the arts for soft power and global image-building. Ministries and institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), The Sangeet Natak Akademi, and zonal cultural centers play a pivotal role in organizing performances, sponsoring artists, and showcasing India’s artistic diversity on domestic and international stages.

Cultural diplomacy is now central to India's foreign policy, with classical musicians and dancers regularly featured in diplomatic missions, UN celebrations, and international festivals as embodiments of India’s “civilizational soft power.” Programs like *Festival of India* in various countries and *Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav* within India have woven performance art into national celebrations, constructing a historical continuum from ancient glory to present progress. Such spectacles not only highlight India's cultural diversity but also craft a curated image of unity and grandeur aimed at global audiences.

At the same time, national events like the Republic Day Parade and state-led festivals such as *Rashtriya Sanskriti Mahotsav* integrate folk, tribal, and classical forms, often framing them as “national treasures.” While these efforts serve the purpose of cultural unification and pride, they also raise critical questions about representation and political narrative. What is included or excluded in these performances often reflects the ideological orientation of the state. For instance, recent emphasis on reviving Vedic and Sanskritic forms fits within a broader push toward cultural nationalism, sometimes at the cost of erasing syncretic and regional traditions.

Moreover, the use of classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and Kathak in government programs reinforces certain caste, gender, and religious hierarchies, despite their reinvented status as egalitarian national symbols. Simultaneously, contemporary performance is also becoming a site of critique and contestation. Artists use new digital platforms to resist state narratives, advocate for marginalized cultures, and innovate beyond traditional frameworks. These parallel movements underscore the multifaceted and often contradictory role that music and dance continue to play in contemporary Indian politics and society.

5. Discussion

The deployment of music and dance as instruments of political expression has displayed remarkable continuity from ancient India to the present. In ancient courts, rulers used the arts to draw connections between temporal power and divine legitimacy, while also cultivating cosmopolitan images of their courts as centers of refinement and knowledge. These performances served as living texts that enacted the king's role as protector of dharma and enforcer of social harmony. In modern India, while the context has shifted from monarchy to democracy, the logic of performance as a legitimizing and unifying force persists. National spectacles like the Republic Day parade or Independence Day cultural shows are performative affirmations of state sovereignty and multicultural identity.

However, the postcolonial and contemporary emphasis on classical forms has led to critical questions about exclusion, authenticity, and ownership. Whose traditions are preserved, and whose are marginalized? Why do some forms receive state sponsorship while others fade into obscurity? The state's preference for sanitized and "respectable" forms of performance sometimes erases the complex histories of caste, gender, and resistance embedded in these traditions. For example, the transformation of Bharatanatyam from a devadasi ritual to a respectable Brahminized art form involved not only revival but also erasure of its historical roots. Similarly, Dalit, tribal, and Sufi traditions—rich in musical expression—often remain peripheral to mainstream cultural policy.

At the same time, there are counter-movements that challenge state narratives. Dalit rap, tribal festivals, and regional theatre groups use performance as protest, reclaiming space in the cultural landscape. Artists like Arivu, Sumit Samos, and groups like Jana Natya Manch have redefined music and dance as platforms of resistance rather than conformity. These expressions remind us that while performance can be a tool of hegemony, it can also be a medium of dissent.

6. Conclusion

Music and dance in India have always transcended the boundaries of mere artistic expression to become powerful instruments of political and ideological articulation. From the temple sanctuaries and imperial courts of ancient India to the state-run academies and international stages of the 21st century, performance has shaped and reflected the dynamics of power, identity, and nationhood. While the forms and patrons have changed, the underlying function of performance as a mirror and mechanism of sovereignty remains. In contemporary India, as cultural nationalism seeks to define a singular narrative of Indian heritage, it is imperative to acknowledge the multiplicity of voices that contribute to the country's performative traditions. Recognizing and supporting diverse forms—classical, folk, tribal, syncretic, and protest—can ensure that music and dance remain not just tools of governance, but expressions of a truly inclusive culture.

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