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ARTICLE

Dancing ambassadors: The Indian republic's global cultural project

Nikhil Menon

History, University of Notre Dame, USA
Email: nikhilmenon@nd.edu

Abstract

Beginning in the 1950s, emerging from the British empire's shadow, the Indian government helped dancers become globe-trotting, state-sponsored cultural ambassadors, projecting a vision of the young nation's art as ancient, sophisticated, and spiritual. Asserting a 'national culture' (understood by the formerly colonized as essential to decolonization) involved its reconstitution, despite claims to civilizational continuity. This article reveals how dance became the natural candidate for global cultural projection, the ways in which the state allied with artists in this endeavour, and the conflicts this engendered between them. It offers insights into the state's anxieties about the nation's image globally, debates within civil society and between politicians about Indian culture, and the logic underlying how Indian dance was presented differently across the world. The global projection of culture and its reception abroad was part of the contested process of defining it at home. National culture took shape as it travelled the world.

Keywords: decolonization; culture; India; dance; diplomacy; civilization

In the waning days of 1950, a young south Indian classical dancer set sail from Bombay to Egypt aboard the *SS Canton*, accompanied by her troupe of twenty on a cultural mission. They performed in Cairo and Alexandria over a fortnight and though initial responses were lukewarm, a *Hindustan Times* correspondent in Egypt assessed, this simply reflected the novelty of witnessing Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, and Manipuri dances on the banks of the Nile. Surprise and incomprehension soon gave way to 'public enthusiasm and Press encomiums'.[1] If, as rumoured, the government of India had played a role in the dancer's Egyptian foray, the report continued, then it was already paying dividends.[2]

This string of concerts in Egypt by Mrinalini Sarabhai and her troupe, Darpana, was part of a broader plan. When the Egyptian ambassador had met Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in December 1949, the ambassador proposed an 'Indian Festival' in Cairo. From India's perspective, arguments in favour of a 'grand gesture' showcasing culture were hard-nosed. It could cement trade relations with the Gulf states and combat Pakistani propaganda. Pakistan, officials believed, was 'boldly planning to create a network of economic relations with Mid-Eastern countries' by appealing to the 'Koranic tenet that all Muslims are brothers and as such should primarily serve one another's needs', and making the 'propagandist suggestion that India is dangerously anti-Muslim'. Pakistan's goal was 'to keep us as far away as possible from the markets and sympathies

[1]'Triumphant Visit of Indian Dancers', *Hindustan Times* (hereafter, *HT*), 16 January 1951, 5.
[2]Ibid.

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of the Mid-Eastern people'. A festival of Indian culture in Cairo, New Delhi hoped, would counteract this. As its ambassador to Egypt explained, 'no opportunity should be lost of projecting India in these parts'.

Eventually, constrained by finances, the only part of the proposed festival to manifest was a dance troupe. The invitation from the Ministry of External Affairs asked dancers to 'contribute to the fair name of our country'. The Education Ministry informed Sarabhai that 'this is the first time a Dance troupe is being sponsored by the Government of India'. A beseeching telegram followed: 'STRONGLY URGE YOU MAY KINDLY AGREE FOR SAKE OF INDIA'S PRESTIGE.'[3]

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Beginning soon after independence, the Indian state engaged in a campaign to project 'Indian' culture across the globe. Emerging from nearly two centuries of colonial rule in 1947, poor in material and might, the republic's international status was dwarfed by its ambitions for global importance. What its government could do, however, was capitalize on the country's cultural heritage to present this new nation as an ancient civilization returning to prominence. The government began to project a 'national culture' abroad—making civilizational claims that asserted ancient achievement, decolonization, and a future of resurrected greatness. While primarily a state-driven project, it was one that had broadly sympathetic backing from civil society and a nationalist press who believed that their country's international reputation was grossly misaligned with its rightful status.

Indian cultural diplomacy emerged from and in response to global contexts. One of the twentieth century's most significant political transformations, decolonization dissolved European empires across Asia and Africa, reconstituting power across the world, and ushering in new political formations and experimentation with novel identities.[4] It was, as with globalization, a 'dialectical process of de- and re-territorialization'.[5] Among the many challenges former colonies confronted was the need to realize decolonization in culture. This challenge—of decolonizing culture and forging national cultures in 'a world remade'—was recognized across anti-imperial geographies, evident in Nehru's *Discovery of India* as much as in Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.[6] Understanding it requires us to be attuned to what one scholar described as 'the cultural transformations of decolonization in a global register'.[7]

The other global context shaping this Indian project and its trajectory was the Cold War.[8] During it, starting in the 1950s, culture in general and dance in particular emerged as a global field for engagement and competition. While the Cold War imposed certain immobilities on people and capital, it also opened culture as a realm of interaction and exchange,

[3]F. No. 7(80)-A.W.T.I. (Secret), MEA, National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter, NAI).

[4]On the meaning of decolonization as a global process and the visions it nurtured—encompassing economics, politics, race, and gender—see Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2015); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Martin Thomas, *The End of Empires and a World Remade: A Global History of Decolonization* (Princeton University Press, 2024); Durba Mitra, *The World That Was: A History of Third World Feminism against Authoritarianism* (Princeton University Press, 2026).

[5]Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, 'Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization', *Journal of Global History*, no. 5 (2010): 149–70, 152.

[6]Thomas, *The End of Empires and a World Remade*.

[7]Radhika Natarajan, 'Performing Multiculturalism: The Commonwealth Arts Festival of 1965', *Journal of British Studies* 53 (July 2014): 705–33, 707.

[8]On the Cold War as a global event, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (Basic Books, 2017). For essays exploring the entangled histories of decolonization and the Cold War, see Leslie James and Elisabeth Leake, eds., *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

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notwithstanding its role as a site of contestation.[9] While far from friction-free, it was still a moment of globalization and unprecedented transnational integration for dance, producing denser networks, propelling more artists to perform across borders, connecting and expanding audiences across the world. Dancers from non-aligned India participated in this global cultural exchange (on both sides of the Iron Curtain without allying with either bloc) as private artists and national representatives, carving a space for themselves and for what was coming to be defined as Indian culture across the world.

Against the backdrop of decolonization and the Cold War, the republic sought to fashion a national culture. This involved disentangling (and constructing) 'Indian culture' from the intercontinental, multicultural, imperial assemblage of which it had been a part. The assertion of a bounded, unified Indian culture laid ahistorical national claim to millennia of subcontinental history and to even those spaces (like princely states) that sought their own sovereignty and asserted their own 'national' cultures.[10] The debates that emerged over what constituted Indian dance and culture, this article suggests, reveal that the global projection of culture and its reception abroad was part of the contested process of defining it at home.

Decolonization and post-colonial nation-building led to a reformulation of culture, its resignification, and reterritorialization. 'Indian dance' was a new category inaugurated by a new nation. It transformed what had often been referred to (and even advertised by South Asian performers) abroad as 'Hindu Ballet' to 'Indian dance' (with defined forms within it). Dance genres from South Asia went from signifying regional cultures to representing Indian culture and civilization, but also from representing the territory and culture of British India to being specifically linked to the smaller (post-Partition) Indian republic's border. In the early post-colonial period, dance was the instrument used to globalize Indian culture—not to dilute the nation-state, but to empower it.

This article contributes to the global history of decolonization using post-colonial India's cultural diplomacy to understand the reterritorialization, reconstruction, and international redeployment of culture that occurred across the formerly colonized world. While focused on the ways in which a national culture came to be defined, the article is also attuned to the integration of national cultures into an emerging global arena of institutionalized cultural interaction and competition. As a history of the national reconstitution of culture and its transcontinental projection, it attends both to local developments and this global integration, and—underlining what Sebastian Conrad terms global history's 'inherently relational' nature—how, in this instance, what came to be recognized as Indian culture was formed by and through its global circulation.[11]

[9]On dance diplomacy during the Cold War, see, for instance, Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Wesleyan University Press, 1999); Cadra Peterson McDaniel, *American–Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere* (Lexington Books, 2014); Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Victoria Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War: The Dance of American Diplomacy* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Anne Searcy, *Ballet in the Cold War: A Soviet–American Exchange* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Emily Wilcox and Soo Ryon Soon, eds., *Inter-Asia in Motion: Dance as Method* (Routledge, 2023).

[10]On the claims to sovereignty from within its borders that were rejected by the post-colonial Indian state (in Nagaland, Hyderabad, and Kashmir respectively), see Lydia Walker, *States-in-Waiting: A Counternarrative of Global Decolonization* (Cambridge University Press, 2024); Sunil Purushotham, *From Raj to Republic: Sovereignty, Violence, and Democracy in India* (Stanford University Press, 2021); Hafsa Kanjwal, *Colonizing Kashmir State-Building under Indian Occupation* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

[11]Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 65. Angelika Epple refers to this as a mode of global history that 'shows how entities change continuously through their involvement in relations'. Angelika Epple, 'Calling for a Practice Turn in Global History: Practices as Drivers of Globalization/s', *History and Theory* 57, no. 3 (2018): 390–407, 395.

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There has been a surge of interest in international histories of post-colonial India.[12] However, historical scholarship on the republic's cultural diplomacy has only recently begun.[13] While this literature has begun exploring fields ranging from literary societies, to animal exchanges, cultural delegations, international exhibitions, and festivals of arts and science, the present article offers a new history of the Indian state's transnational ambitions through a study of post-colonial dance diplomacy. Dance was the dominant mode of state-authorized cultural diplomacy in the early post-colonial years. It was thus a forerunner to the other cultural forms chosen for international exhibition by the state, and it also foreshadowed the persistent emphasis on India's 'timelessness' and 'sophisticated' civilization in the global projection of the nation. Dance was the earliest vehicle for this project because of its status in mid-twentieth century India. It had been the object of social reform movements and the subject of national conversation since the late nineteenth century with upper-caste and nationalist-approved reformed 'classical' styles emerging on the eve of independence. The post-colonial government recognized this and offered patronage. Crucially, unlike other forms of cultural expression from India, Indian dance was also distinguished by already having a significant transnational market and audience by the 1930s, making it conducive to global export.[14]

This article opens with an exploration of how a foreign audience for what was known as Hindu Ballet was cultivated by a small number of artists in early twentieth century. Subsequently, in the 1950s, the Indian government helped dancers emerge as globe-trotting, state-sponsored cultural ambassadors, projecting a vision of the young nation's art as ancient, sophisticated, and spiritual. The article reveals how dance became the natural candidate for global cultural projection, the ways in which the state allied with artists in this endeavour, and the conflicts this engendered between them (often rooted in gendered expectations placed on female dancers as cultural representatives). This offers insights into the state's anxieties about the nation's image globally, and debates within civil society and between politicians over what constituted Indian culture. Finally, this article identifies the operation of an international sociology of taste among Indian bureaucrats and

[12]See, for instance, Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis, eds., *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Leiden University Press, 2022); Bérénice Guyot-Réchard and Elisabeth Leake, eds., *South Asia Unbound: New International Histories of the Subcontinent* (Leiden University Press, 2023); Walker, *States-in-Waiting*; Swapna Kona Nayadu, *The Nehru Years: An International History of Non-Alignment* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

[13]See Joydeep Sen, 'Bullock Cart or Satellite Launch Vehicle? Controversies over Representing Science and Technology in India at the Science Museum in 1982', *South Asian History and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2012): 414–39; Radhika Natarajan, 'Performing Multiculturalism: The Commonwealth Arts Festival of 1965', *Journal of British Studies* 53, no. 3 (2014): 705–33; Elise Hodson, 'Exhibiting Independent India: Textiles and Ornamental Arts at the Museum of Modern Art in New York', in *The Routledge Companion to Design Studies*, ed. Penny Sparke and Fiona Fisher (Routledge, 2016); Rebecca M. Brown, *Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival of India* (University of Washington Press, 2017); Claire Wintle, 'Diplomacy and the Design School: The Ford Foundation and India's National Institute of Design', *Design and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2017): 207–24; Claire Wintle, 'Displaying Independent India Abroad: Nationalism, Cultural Diplomacy, and Collaboration at the Nehru Memorial Exhibition, 1965–2015', in *Heritage at the Interface: Interpretation and Identity*, ed. Glenn Hooper (University Press of Florida, 2018); Smriti Sawkar, 'Exporting Culture: Festival of India 1982', *Contemporary South Asia* 27, no. 3 (2019): 407–21; Adhira Mangalagiri, 'Ellipses of Cultural Diplomacy: The 1957 Chinese Literary Sphere in Hindi', *Journal of World Literature* 4, no. 4 (2019): 508–29; Adhira Mangalagiri, 'The Culture of Cultural Diplomacy: China and India, 1947–1952', *China and Asia* 3 (2021): 202–16; Tansen Sen, 'Giraffes and Elephants: Circulation of Exotic Animals in the Longue Durée History of the Indian Ocean World', in *Cargoes in Motion: Materiality and Connectivity across the Indian Ocean*, ed. Burkhard Schnepel (Ohio University Press, 2022), 113–14; Rashna Darius Nicholson, *The Festival of India: Development and Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[14]For works on dance diplomacy from the perspective of other Asian countries, see Emily Wilcox, 'Performing Bandung: China's Dance Diplomacy with India, Indonesia, and Burma, 1953–1962', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 18, no. 4 (2017): 518–39; Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (University of California Press, 2018); Emily Wilcox, 'When Folk Dance Was Radical: Cold War Yangge, World Youth Festivals, and Overseas Leftist Culture in the 1950s and 1960s', *China Perspectives*, no. 1 (2020): 33–42; Wilcox and Soon, *Inter-Asia in Motion*. The scholarship on dance diplomacy in Western settings—overwhelmingly Cold War focused—includes Prevots, *Dance for Export*; McDaniel, *American–Soviet Cultural Diplomacy*; Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*; Phillips, *Martha Graham's Cold War*; and Searcy, *Ballet in the Cold War*.

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government officials that informed how New Delhi determined which dance genres were best suited for exhibition in different regions of the world. It was an implicit hierarchy categorizing peoples by notions of their relative cultural refinement. Undergirding this was Indian elites' implicit self-perception of belonging to an ancient, advanced culture themselves.

This elaborate diplomatic project was only possible because of a dramatic mid-twentieth-century transformation in the prestige of dance in public life. When famed Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova travelled to India in 1922, she claimed to have searched in vain for classical dance. Dejected, her partner Victor Dandre huffed, 'There are no schools of dancing in India and it is an art which nobody is interested in.'[15] Three years later when American dance pioneers Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn visited, they were similarly disappointed. Dancing was 'frowned upon and there was very little to be seen', Shawn observed.[16] By 1949, however, reports carried by *The Tribune* in Ambala and the Bombay-based *Bharat Jyoti* talked of a 'renaissance of Indian dance'.[17] A few years on, a Bombay correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* proclaimed, 'Of all the native arts, none is more popular in India than dance.'[18] Something had changed.

What occurred in the intervening years was a fundamental reassessment of the status of dance. The historic dances of South Asia, as scholarship has well-established, had come to be viewed by late nineteenth century elites as disreputable on account of their association with lower-caste hereditary performers (*devadasis*, *bais*, and *tawaifs*) whose sexual and conjugal practices were viewed as sordid. Informed by such attitudes white Christian missionaries and Indian social reformers allied in an Anti-Nautch Movement that decried *devadasi* life as sexually exploitative, a moral outrage. Beginning in the late 1920s, some Indian nationalists sought to reclaim dance, 'restore' its status, and present it as the living artefact of an ancient civilization.[19] Simultaneously, Western interest in dances of the 'Orient' also spurred a generation of mostly upper-caste dancers and nationalists to acquire or endorse training in them. The result, over time and across dance forms, was a transformed landscape of respectability for 'classical' dance in which new communities took to performance, making stylistic alterations to form, costume, and musical accompaniment, establishing institutions of learning and propagation, and, perhaps most significantly, creating a middle-class high-caste audience. Dance was being scrubbed of its associations with lower castes and moral turpitude.

'Hindu ballet' goes global

As dance in India underwent a reappraisal in public perception during the first half of the twentieth century, no one shaped its reputation abroad more than someone who had no formal training. Uday Shankar was arguably India's first dance emissary—certainly the first to be widely recognized as such both abroad and at home. An elite educated Brahmin, Shankar's social status conferred his dancing with respectability, and by fusing different Indian dance styles with Western

[15]Ashish Mohan Khokar, 'The Role and Contribution of Pioneering Gurus and Foreigners in the Revival of Classical Indian Dances', 8 February 2011, reproduced in *Narthaki*, accessed 19 June 2026, https://narthaki.com/info/tdhc/tdhc26.html.

[16]Mohan Khokar, 'Dance in Transition: The Pioneers', *Marg: Trends and Transitions in Indian Art* 36, no. 2 (1983): 41–76, 42–3.

[17]Khagen De Sarkar, 'Udaya Shankar: Hunt For Funds to Build Culture', *The Bharat Jyoti*, Sunday, 20 November 1949, reproduced in '1949–50 Press Cuttings relating to Performances in India, England and Canada', Part IV, Press Clippings (hereafter, Press Clippings), Uday Shankar Papers, Prime Minister's Museum and Library, New Delhi (hereafter, PMML).

[18]Henry W. Koller, 'Dancing in India to Classical Patterns', *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 August 1956, 6.

[19]See, for instance, Amit Srinivasan, 'Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance', *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 6 (1985): 1869–76; Matthew Harp Allen, 'Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance', *Drama Review* 41, no. 3 (1997): 63–100; Avanthi Meduri, 'Bharatnatyam as a Global Dance: Some Issues in Research, Teaching, and Practice', *Dance Research Journal* 36, no. 2 (2004): 11–29; Janet O' Shea, *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage* (Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji, eds., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Rumya Sree Putcha, *The Dancer's Voice: Performance and Womanhood in Transnational India* (Duke University Press, 2023).

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presentation he was able to appeal to an Orientalist fascination with India. It was the runaway transnational success of his troupe (and that of a handful of others, such as Ram Gopal, to a much lesser extent) that led to dance ripening for diplomatic picking. The international popularity of 'Indian dance' even contributed to its domestic mainstreaming.

Born into landed lineage in 1900 to a Bengali father whose career was attached to courts in northern princely states, Shankar spent much of his childhood in his maternal village of Nasratpur, near Benares. There, though tutored in painting, Shankar was drawn to streetside dances by lower-caste Ahir (pastoralist) and Chamar (leather-worker) performers, sneaking away to watch them. One in particular, a Dalit shoemaker named Matadin, fascinated the young Uday who imitated his movements.[20] Shankar eventually made his way to the Royal College of Art in London, where, at the British Museum—losing himself amidst its collections of subcontinental sculpture, painting, and literature—his eyes were opened to 'what a great heritage in art and culture we had in our country'.[21]

Unfulfilled by standing in front of an easel, Shankar turned to dance, spurred by a chance encounter in 1923 with Pavlova who was looking for help with a production named *Oriental Impressions*. Shankar joined Pavlova's company choreographing *Hindu Wedding* and *Radha and Krishna*, performing in the latter. It debuted in September 1923 at the Royal Opera House and he went on tour with Pavlova to North America for nine months.[22]

Shankar would live in Europe for the rest of the decade. He began as a penniless dance instructor and emaciated cabaret performer at 'shabby haunts of the drunken' in London's West End.[23] Starting over in Paris, Shankar flitted between cabaret and library, studying Indian history and art at the Louvre and Musée Guimet, building a repertoire.[24] From this impoverished chrysalis Shankar emerged as a 'Hindu dancer', flaunting grandiose stage names—'Le Prince Shankar' and 'Le Prince Hindoue Shankar'.

This troupe of 'Hindu dancers'—one that would go on to become among the foremost ambassadors of Indian culture in the pre-war West—consisted of untrained Indians, a French pianist, and a Swiss heiress. It comprised Shankar's relatives (the youngest, a nine-year-old Ravi Shankar) and friends, including the Parisian Simone Barbiere (a romantic and dance partner he renamed Simkie). And it was underwritten by another European woman, Swiss artist Alice Boner.[25]

Shankar's productions conjured the India Westerners wished to see at a time of heightened interest in Eastern spirituality and philosophy, and the rise of Theosophy.[26] The description of dances from India as 'Hindu' or 'Oriental' was commonplace in the West, lasting well into the second half of the twentieth century ('Western critical enterprise's deliberate primitivizing tactic', according to Priya Venkat Raman).[27] But the *ouevre* defied categorization in any of the subcontinent's traditional dance genres. Shankar was, as dance scholars have described, an innovative 'self-orientalizing' choreographer whose Hindu ballets were a mélange, a form of modern dance rather than anything traditional.[28] He served foreign audiences what Urmimala Sarkar Munsi calls an 'auto-exoticization'.[29]

[20]Ruth K. Abrahams, 'Uday Shankar: The Early Years, 1900–1938', *Dance Chronicle* 30, no. 3 (2007): 363–426; Fernau Hall, 'Honoring Uday Shankar', *Dance Chronicle* 7, no. 3 (1984–85): 326–44.

[21]Sunil Kothari, 'Interview: Uday Shankar Now on a Tour of the United States Discusses his Work', *Times of India* (hereafter, *ToI*), 17 November 1968, 7.

[22]Kothari, 'Interview'.

[23]Ashish Mohan Khokar, 'Uday Shankar', *Sahapedia*, accessed 19 June 2026, https://www.sahapedia.org/uday-shankar.

[24]Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, *Uday Shankar and His Transcultural Experimentations* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 90.

[25]Oliver Craske, *Indian Sun: The Life and Music of Ravi Shankar* (Da Capo, 2020), 35.

[26]On the power of the Western (white) audience's gaze in relation to foreign dancers in another context, see Adria L. Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits through the U.S. Empire* (Duke University Press, 2012).

[27]Priya Venkat Raman, 'Indian Dance Criticism as Decolonial Post-Performance Performative', *Dance Chronicle* 47, no. 2 (2024): 185–213, 200–1.

[28]Shobhana Jeyasingh, 'Getting Off the Orient Express', *Dance Theatre Journal* 8, no. 2 (1990): 34–7.

[29]Munsi, *Uday Shankar*, 20, 132.

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Over the 1930s, however, as they toured to acclaim through Europe, America, the Middle East, and South-East Asia, Shankar's art came to represent Indian culture. People approached to say, 'Shankar! We have seen India through you.'[30] He travelled to the United States at the end of 1932, working with Russian-American impresario Sol Hurok. Having watched a performance in Paris, John Martin, dance critic for the *New York Times*, prepared readers for Shankar's imminent arrival: 'Their purpose', he wrote, 'is to make known the culture of India abroad.'[31] The tour exceeded even Hurok's 'most optimistic predictions'.[32]

Indian-American writer Basanta Koomar Roy chronicled Shankar's travels in America in the 1930s, noting its 'phenomenal success'. Before a show in Montclaire, New Jersey, Roy noticed a girl on crutches struggling up marble stairs, wincing but excited. When the curtains descended, he approached the child and learned that she had been 'kicked by a horse'. When Roy suggested that she should be convalescing in bed, she said that she would 'crawl out' of her 'deathbed to see Shan-Kar dance'. An 'American boy' told him that when his father gave him money to buy new shoes, he repaired them instead to be able to buy more tickets to Shankar's shows. 'What is true of New York', Roy crowed, 'is true of all of America, all Asia, and all Europe ... The very mention of his name fills halls and theatres in every country, continent, and hemisphere.'[33]

It is worth noting that Shankar's crusade was fuelled by inspiration from Dalit performers and foreign exhibits of Indian exotica at the British Museum and Louvre. And his art was a hybridized, modernist cultural offering—Hindu ballet. Yet, he portrayed himself, and was interpreted abroad, as representing 'authentic' India. To be credible, at home and abroad, however, this untrained dancer needed to be a Brahmin. In an interview for the *San Francisco Examiner*, Shankar—whose caste was often mentioned in his foreign coverage as a badge of distinction—let slip his own casteist condescension. While India's arts were glorious, he noted, he was 'depressed by the performers. Most of our women dancers are of low social status and utterly ignorant. Men are of low social and educational level ... dance was relegated to the lower social levels of society.' It was because 'We of the upper classes, who studied at universities' looked down on the performing arts that 'our arts remain underdeveloped'. By contrast, he explained, members of his troupe were from the other end of the social (i.e. caste) spectrum. The task of reviving Indian dance and exhibiting it to the world involved rescuing it from the poor, illiterate, lower-caste performer (like Matadin, his own inspiration).[34]

Shankar was by this point widely viewed as a saviour of Indian dance and an ambassador of its culture, feted by James Joyce on the Continent and Rabindranath Tagore in the subcontinent. His detractors—Madras-based purists, troubled that someone with no formal training in any specific genre was received abroad as representing 'traditional' Indian dancing—were few and far between.[35] Returning aboard a steamer into Bombay's port in May 1933, newspapers wrote of 'Uday Shankar's Success in Foreign Countries' while 'reviving the ancient classical dances of India'.[36] Over the course of that summer he presented forty two shows, from Lahore to Madras to Rangoon. In Patna, a boisterous group boarded the train to garland his troupe, and when they arrived in Calcutta to the sounds of conch shells being blown, they were whisked away in a Rolls

[30]'Uday Shankar: The Spirit of India Speaks', *The Chaka*, Tuesday, 1 November 1949, 2. Reproduced in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[31]John Martin, 'The Dance: Art of India: Its Culture Interpreted by Shan-Kar and His Group of Hindu Performers', *New York Times*, 4 September 1932, X7.

[32]Sol Hurok, *S. Hurok Presents: A Memoir of the Dance World* (Hermitage House, 1953), republished online by Project Gutenberg, accessed 19 June 2026, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/68861/pg68861-images.html.

[33]Basanta Koomar Roy, 'The Secret of Shan-Kar's Success', *American Dancer* 10, no. 3 (1933): 16.

[34]Gobind Behari Lal, 'On Science Frontiers', *San Francisco Examiner*, 13 February 1933, 7.

[35]Prarthana Puryakastha, 'Dancing Otherness: Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Work of Uday Shankar', *Dance Research Journal* 44, no. 1 (2012): 69–92, 75.

[36]'Well Known Indian Dancer in Bombay: Uday Shankar's Success in Foreign Countries', *ToI*, 25 May 1933, 16.

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Royce. When tickets sold out in Calcutta, their publicist's office windows were smashed by angry fans.[37]

By the eve of independence in 1947, Shankar had long been a celebrity, an icon for nationalist pride, and a cultural ambassador. He was now, in a contemporary's estimation, the best-known Indian in the world after Gandhi and Tagore.[38] Ironically, while he was hailed as rescuing India's ancient dancing traditions and taking it to the world, what had actually occurred was somewhat the reverse: Shankar had developed a modern dance style without formal training, mostly in Europe and catering to Western tastes, which he then brought back to India. The adulation Indians expressed for Shankar was not just a reflection of their enthusiasm for Indian dance traditions, but rather their excitement about the passion with which foreigners consumed what was presented as authentic Indian culture. Shankar was a mirror in which Indians saw themselves in the light they desired and believed they deserved. The global reception of 'Indian dance' in the late colonial period was thus part of the broader process that transformed the social status of dancing at home. Over the course of the first two decades of independence, as dance in India consolidated its transformation, with 'classical' dances becoming an upper caste practice, it also became the pre-eminent mode of Indian cultural projection abroad. It is no accident that the cultural forms recently adopted by a liberal upper-caste elite as their own now came to stand in for 'national' culture, patronized at home and performed abroad by mostly upper castes.

Dancers for a free nation

It was one thing for dancers to loosely represent a culture as imperial subjects in a transcultural empire; it was quite another to be deployed as a diplomatic asset by a post-colonial republic that sought to define a national culture and draw political legitimacy from it. The anti-colonial nationalist claim to civilizational greatness, indexed by its 'classical' culture and survival of ancient dance forms (rhetoric Shankar participated in despite his own modernism) was continued by the post-colonial state in its cultural diplomacy.

The role that Shankar had helped carve, which much of the nationalist elite had celebrated, dovetailed with emergent plans for cultural outreach at the Ministry of External Affairs where it was championed by Prime Minister Nehru and other influential figures such as Foreign Secretary (and future ambassador) K.P.S. Menon and serial ambassador Vijayalakshmi Pandit, among others. It is worth nothing, however, that while the government of early post-colonial India repeatedly turned to Uday Shankar when it came to cultural diplomacy, the modernist style of dancing he represented was not patronized by the government through the Sangeet Natak Akademi (the national music and dance academy established in 1953). As Joan Erdman has argued, 'Pre-independence nationalism was transmuted, in the new nation, into affirmation of its ancient heritage.' Dance 'was to be either classical or folk, and there was no room for new traditions'.[39] The latter claim made Shankar's innovative modernism increasingly problematic.

Over the following years the government would look ever more to dance as an arm of cultural diplomacy, forming a staple line item in annual budgets of the Ministry of External Affairs (within its External Publicity Division). Significantly, it was also boosted by calls from civil society to wield culture globally. The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Anti-Nautch Movement, the nationalist backlash to it reclaiming dance as classical, the upper-caste recoding of dance as respectable, and Uday Shankar's celebrity internationally and within India had all led to dance becoming part of the national conversation by the mid-twentieth century. In the early years after

[37]Craske, *Indian Sun*, 49.

[38]Roy, 'The Secret of Shan-Kar's Success', 16.

[39]Joan Erdman, 'Who Remembers Uday Shankar?', 1997, originally published in *Interchange*, accessed 5 July 2026, https://gold.muktomona.com/new_site/mukto-mona/Articles/jaffor/uday_shanka2.

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independence many Indians had thoughts on whether and how dance could be used for national projection.

In the autumn of 1949, a nearly fifty-year-old Shankar was about to embark yet again on a tour of North America and Europe, after a decade. Ahead of his journey, he was invited to speak at Calcutta's Rotary Club. Describing him as the 'cultural head of modern India', an editorial in their publication *The Chaka* asked, 'What has India got?' The answer: 'The only commodity we can dare offer to the world is our great culture!' Shankar, therefore, 'should be sent to tour the world as our Cultural Ambassador, and we are pretty sure he would earn for us a good-will which may be weighed in gold'.[40] The next day's *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* editorial urged citizens to come to the dancer's aid. The state, it reminded, bore a responsibility too because great artists were the 'true ambassadors of a country in foreign lands ... more than politicians and diplomats can ever hope to [be]'. Acknowledging that India faced numerous pressing political and economic problems, the editorial cautioned, 'But as a man does not live by bread alone, so also a nation ... cannot survive by concentrating its efforts entirely on the material.' If India is to be restored to the glory that is 'her right' then art would have to be part of that restoration.[41]

As Shankar's troupe journeyed to America, it was tracked in newspapers back in India, across regions and in multiple languages. *Jagran* in Kanpur informed readers that Shankar's performances were received with 'zori se prashansa' (enthusiastic praise).[42] Tamil weekly *Naradar* reported on the resounding success of Shankar's seventh tour of the United States—full houses with VIP attendees, and broadcasts on television and radio across the length and breadth of the country.[43] *Sargam*, which carried a serialized Hindi autobiography *Meri Kahaani* (My Story) by Shankar over months, proclaimed that his life was at its peak. In a piece titled 'Sanskritik Doot' (Cultural Emissary) it stated that they had learned of the success of his American tour and the very important work he was doing as 'bhartiya sankriti kay doot' (an envoy of Indian culture).[44] *Dinathanthi*, the Tamil newspaper, reported on how numerous critics referred to him as a 'Indiya kalai kalasar doodu' (Indian art and cultural ambassador) and about the compliments paid to him in a similar vein by India's Consul General in New York, R.R. Saxena and his wife at a dinner reception.[45] Playing coastal metropolises and small midwestern towns alike, the troupe performed nearly seventy times in ten weeks.[46]

During his return home, seated in a flat in London's West End in April 1950, Shankar complained to a journalist about his financial situation: dire despite a successful international tour. 'Huge sums are spent [by the government] on ... sending ministers to foreign countries, but a first class ballet company can do more good for India than quite a lot of ambassadors.'[47] Later, in a cramped apartment within the Excelsior Theatre in Bombay, he told another reporter about the sensation his dances created in foreign capitals where, not only the cultured 'high-ups' attended but also 'shop-girls, manicurists' and the 'gray mass of ordinary humanity'. Conveying the benefit this could have for the country, he wrote to Foreign Secretary K.P.S. Menon seeking support for a future tour. Menon's response acknowledged the dancer's value: 'We are fully conscious that India cannot have better publicity abroad than at the hand—and feet—of such Cultural Ambassadors as

[40]Sookamal Ghose, 'Uday Shankar: The Cultural Head of Modern India', *The Chaka*, *Bulletin of the Rotary Club of Calcutta*, no. 855, 1 November 1949, 1.

[41]'Uday Shankar's Mission', *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 2 November 1949, in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[42]Untitled, *Jagran*, Kanpur, 6 January 1950, in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[43]Untitled, *Naradar*, 1 March 1950 in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[44]'*Sanskritic Doot*', *Sargam*, February 1950, in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[45]'*Nadan Nippunar Uday Shankarukku Americavil Virundu*', *Dinathanthi*, 17 March 1950, in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[46]'Uday Shankar's American Triumph', *My Magazine*, 1 April 1950, in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[47]'Appreciation of Indian Art in the West', *Sunday News*, 30 April 1950, in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

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yourself.'[48] Many Indians agreed. As stated in the Tamil newspaper *Bharatha Devi* in a report on a reception held in Shankar's honour in Madras, 'Kalai Moolam Indiyavvai Ayalnattunar Nanku Ariya Seyyalaamey' (We Could Make India Better Known to Foreigners Through Art).[49]

The Indian government appeared to be taking heed. Plans were already afoot for the first dance troupe to be sponsored on a foreign visit (Mrinalini Sarabhai's in Egypt). In the very first session of Parliament earlier that year in 1950, former trade unionist, journalist, and Constituent Assembly member, B. Shiva Rao, made a pitch for emphasizing 'cultural activities' within India's 'external publicity'. As proof of its potential, he added: 'I think it was only this morning we read in the papers about the reception that had been given to Uday Shankar in New York.' The country, he cautioned, was at a perilous moment when 'colonial powers' were biased against India due to its anti-colonial history and vocal support for global decolonization. A variety of reasons made powerful nations 'more perceptive to propaganda from Pakistan', tilted the British press against India, and compromised sections of the media in America, France, and Belgium.[50] Cultural diplomacy was an antidote.

Even earlier, within months of independence, India's new embassies and consulates had begun making plans to integrate dance into the nation's authorized image. Soon after the Indian Embassy in Moscow had been established, for instance, the ambassador to the Soviet Union, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, wrote to her elder brother, the Prime Minister of India, about 'arranging for a dance troupe to come here'. In a letter marked 'Secret', she wrote that it would be 'wonderful', she thought, 'for the Russians—who talk eternally of culture and art—to see what India can do'. And since India's stated aim was 'to come closer to the Soviets through art and not politics … [t]his would be a demonstration of that claim'. Showcasing India's civilizational grandeur would also be 'a lesson for the many ignorant Westerners [in the other embassies] who rant eternally about saving Western civilization'.[51] Pandit's espousal of the dancers as diplomats would continue throughout her distinguished diplomatic career.

The views of Indian diplomats were not out of step with civil society and elite opinion at home. A column in a national daily at the beginning of the decade remarked that dancers were necessary cultural ambassadors: 'It is needless to emphasize that India does need this representation to clear the mistaken notions so rife in the western hemisphere about this country, her people and culture.'[52] Within a few years, dance had become so much a part of the country's international image that the national carrier Air India would pay for advertisements in art magazines titled 'India … Land of Dance'.[53] The following year, Air India began bankrolling foreign tours for artists presenting 'Classical Dances of India'—a global campaign, with India as the brand and dancers the brand ambassadors.[54]

Indian citizens debated dancers' role as national representatives. Responding to a column by *The Statesman's* dance critic that hailed dancer Indrani Rahman as 'the most excellent cultural ambassador of India', C.R. Choudhuri took issue in a letter to the editor. The critic, he thought, had got carried away. For 'Dance alone was not the culture of India; nor is it the most important aspect of Indian culture.' It included literature, arts, science, and religion. And so, despite their

[48]Letters between Uday Shankar and K.P.S. Menon, 31 August 1950 and 2 September 1950, Instalment II, Subject File 3, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[49]'*Kalai Moolam Indiyavvai Ayalnattunar Nanku Ariya Seyyalaamey*', *Bharatha Devi*, 13 December 1950, in Press Clippings, Uday Shankar Papers, PMML.

[50]B. Shiva Rao in Lok Sabha, 17 March 1950, Parliamentary Debates (Part 1—Questions and Answers) Official Report, Vol. II 1950, 1740.

[51]Letter from Vijayalakshmi Pandit to Jawaharlal Nehru, 22 March 1948, Vijayalakshmi Pandit Papers, Instalment I, Subject File 57, PMML.

[52]'Current Topics Cultural Ambassador a Presidential Brew', *ToI*, 4 May 1950, 6.

[53]'India … Land of Dance', *Marg* 10 (Special Issue on Bharata Natyam), Advertisement, no. 4 (1957): [3].

[54]'Shrimati Indrani and Her Troupe of Musicians Present a Series of Classical Dances of India', Air India International advertisement in Indrani Rahman Papers. I am extremely grateful to Ram Rahman for allowing me to consult these papers.

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admiration of Rahman's art, it was inaccurate to refer to her as a cultural ambassador of the country. At most, he continued pedantically, she may be termed 'cultural first Secretary of India'.[55] Disputing this suggested demotion in the dancer's status, Amarjit Sahay retorted in the pages of the newspaper to say that it was no 'exaggerated eulogy' to refer to Rahman as cultural ambassador. 'It is visits abroad such as Mrs. Rehman's which strengthens the cultural ties between nations.'[56]

Exhibiting culture abroad led to disputes over what constituted Indian culture. To some upper-caste religious conservatives, dancing—especially by women—evoked low-caste performers and dangerously associated Hindu culture with sexuality. It was a view that repeatedly reared its head in Parliament. In mid-March 1954, seventy-year-old Hindu Mahasabha politician N.B. Khare declaimed the iniquities of official cultural diplomacy: 'If somebody wants to go to foreign countries to preach *vedanta* philosophy ... Government does not help—But it helps for sending actresses who only play with their gluteal muscles. Is this our culture?' While especially crass, this sexist characterization of official sponsorship of dancers conveyed cultural conservatives' unease about the links, real and imagined, between dancing, movies, and *devadasi* traditions. The reference to dancers as actresses was an allusion to the increasingly frequent occurrence of trained dancers appearing in movies, especially ones driven by song and dance. The latter category included several film stars of the era, including Kamala Lakshman, Tara Chowdhri, and, perhaps most famously, Vyjayanthimala Bali. To upper-caste Hindu conservatives like Khare, female dancers were hardly something India should be proud of, let alone showcase to the world. To them, dance and Indian womanhood, as Rumya S. Putcha has argued in a different context, remained defined by the 'affective triangle' between 'pleasure, shame, and disgust'.[57]

The next year, on 1 June 1955, having witnessed a dress rehearsal by the cultural delegation headed soon to China, writer J. Vijayatunga wrote to the *Sunday Statesman* to convey how appalled he was by its quality. His harshest criticism was for young Anuradha Guha's Kathak—'a vulgarized exhibit' that included 'shimmying which any belly dancer in a dive in Naples or Port Said could have done better'. Even worse was 'how the house went into ecstasies!'[58] While presented as evidence of the delegation's substandard offerings, the visceral distaste was indicative of the risk dance as a medium was seen to pose, especially when showcased as synonymous with India's classical traditions. To some, it teetered toward vulgarity and decadence, threatening to drag the nation (even Indian culture and Hinduism) into disrepute.

Others thought that dance was overrepresented in international exhibitions of culture. In March 1956, following a cultural delegation's tour of the Soviet Union the previous year, Bhakt Darshan, Congress MP from Garhwal, asked sarcastically in Parliament: 'Main yeh jaana chahta hoon ki kya government ki paribhasha main sanskriti aur kala kay andar keval gana aur naachna hi aata hai ya aur cheezay bhi aati hain?' (I would like to know if only singing and dancing figure in the government's definition of culture and the arts, or do other things fit in as well?).[59] A month later, T.S.A. Chettiar, representative from Tiruppur, echoed this sentiment when complaining about the expenditure on cultural delegations. They were not even cultural in a broad sense, he reasoned, because 'when you speak of culture what is mostly spoken about is dancing ... Culture is good, but culture is not dancing.'[60]

A repeated suggestion from the Hindu right was for religious figures—*sadhus*, gurus, and *sanyasis*—to be incorporated into cultural projection. In May 1962, independent (and future Jan Sangh) member of the Lok Sabha from Bijnor, Prakash Vir Shastri, a prominent Arya Samajist,

[55]C.R. Choudhuri, 'Envoys of Culture', *The Statesman*, 1 April 1959, Indrani Rahman Papers.
[56]Amarjit Sahay, 'Envoys of Culture', *The Statesman*, 1 April 1959, Indrani Rahman Papers.
[57]Putcha, *The Dancer's Voice*, 25.
[58]J. Vijayatunga, 'Poor Performance at N.P.L.', *Sunday Statesman*, 2 June 1955, Indrani Rahman Papers.
[59]Bhakt Darshan, 28 July 1956, Lok Sabha Debates, Vol. V, 499.
[60]T.S.A. Chettiar, 16 April 1956, Lok Sabha Debates, Part I—Questions and Answers, Vol. II 1956, 5393–4.

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decried the association of culture in official circles with dance and music. He asked that culture not be viewed so narrowly ('Sanskriti shabd ko aap itna halka na banaaye'). There was a time, he said, when figures like Vivekananda and Ramteerth went as cultural ambassadors ('sanskriti kay sandesh vahak') to foreign lands. However, today, reading the report of the Ministry it appeared that there was a danger of Indian culture being limited to just dance and music ('keval sangeet aur nritya tak hi seemit').[61] In the ensuing discussion that spilled over to the next day, Swami Rameshwaranand, Jan Sangh MP from Karnal, asked a now familiar, 'Kya naachna hi Indian culture hai?' (Is Indian culture just dancing?).[62]

Latitude, conflict, and agency

The dancing sallies that post-colonial India undertook were impelled by broad but inchoate objectives, with particulars often made up along the way. Policy was guided by a combination of national pride and realpolitik on the one hand, and fear of shame and embarrassment at international settings on the other. The latter in particular placed a disproportionate burden on female dancers to represent national culture, usually under male supervision. The lack of a coherent vision or detailed plan combined with fear of disparagement abroad meant that bureaucrats played an outsized role in critical aesthetic judgements, a realm in which they had no expertise. The result, in several instances, was conflict between the Indian state and dancers. Dancers, however, were not simply pawns: they jockeyed for the state's attention and resources, vying for the chance to be authorized (and patronized) international representatives of Indian culture.

While the public rhetoric of the government asserted that India only ever sent its best abroad, rarely did it acknowledge that the determination of what constituted 'best' was heavily influenced by considerations relating to the audience's perceived preferences and cultural faculties. Certain types of dance and dancers, it was held, were suited to some parts of the world more than others. This vague governing logic was shaped by an international sociology of tastes and cultural appetites that appears to have influenced who and where the Indian government channelled dancers.

Assessing foreign taste was most often left to the judgement of the high-ranking Indian bureaucrat stationed there, usually the ambassador or High Commissioner along with their secretarial colleagues. Their decisions were justified to New Delhi by appealing to an amorphous, but shared, 'common sense' about where these societies could be plotted in a complex, unelaborated hierarchy of cultural sophistication and civilizational depth. It reveals the 'continuity of racial and civilizational hierarchies' between imperial and decolonizing societies.[63] Immanent in these judgements was Indian elites' self-perception of their culture's refinement and stability through the ages as a mark of civilizational greatness. Carlos Romulo, Philippines's representative to the Bandung Conference in 1955, thought that Nehru (both Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs) and other Indian representatives to international forums 'typified' the 'affectations of cultural superiority induced by a conscious identification with an ancient civilisation'. It was their 'hallmark'.[64] The exclusively upper-caste nature of India's foreign service officers during this period suggests that the perception of a hierarchy outside India was premised on its existence within. As scholars Vineet Thakur, Pavan Kumar, and Kalathmika Natarajan have argued in their study of Indian diplomacy, caste provided 'both a logic of pecking orders as well as a justificatory

[61]Prakash Vir Shastri, 24 May 1962, Lok Sabha Debates, Third Series, Vol. III, No. 29, 1962, 6598.

[62]Swami Rameshwaranand, 25 May 1962, Lok Sabha Debates, Third Series, Vol. III, No. 30, 1962, 6757–72.

[63]Zaib un Nisa Aziz and Charlotte Kiechel, 'Global History and Decolonization: A Moment of Possibility, a Call for Integration', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 14, no. 1 (2023): 39–47, 43.

[64]Carlos P. Romulo, *The Meaning of Bandung* (University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 12.

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vocabulary of hierarchy in IR [International Relations] and diplomacy in their preoccupation with status, power, prestige and stigma as definitive to the international order'.[65]

As early as in May 1950, Janak Kumari Asgar, a young public servant in the Ministry of Education, summarized what New Delhi was hearing from the Missions abroad as they planned the visit of dancers to Egypt. The reports ranged from adjudicating natural cultural affinities, to claims about innate intellectual capacities, to implicit judgements of how lustful certain peoples were.

The Indian Commissioner in Mauritius (who had requested dancers to visit from India) made clear that classical dancers like Tara Chaudhury and Maharaja Bose 'would be considered too high brow for that country'.[66] Here, among the islands heavily populated by labouring Indian immigrants, the marker of receptivity to classicism was socio-economic. Later that year in October, V.M.M. Nair, First Secretary at the Indian Embassy in Cairo, wrote to New Delhi confirming that they would prefer Mrinalini Sarabhai to Uday Shankar 'as women attract greater attention in Egypt than men!'[67] The Egyptian (male) audience was seen as lacking qualities possessed by the theatre-going public in Western countries or the Soviet Union, where Shankar was popular enough.

When making these judgements of societies, it is clear that they were being arranged in a global hierarchy of taste and sophistication. Assessing the aesthetic qualities of the Japanese, for example, C.S. Jha wrote in December 1957 from the Indian Embassy in Tokyo: 'nothing but a maestro will do in Japan'.[68] This was because the 'standard of artistic appreciation is very high and none but our very best artistes can create an impression'. Here the consideration was purely the level of artistry, not the socio-economic status of the audience or its gender composition. The considerations in Mauritius, Egypt, and Japan were very different.

Three years later, as India was contemplating sending a dance troupe to Africa and soliciting thoughts from its representatives in Aden, Lagos, Accra, Addis Ababa, and Leopoldville, P.N. Haksar, the High Commissioner in Nigeria, held forth on West African artistic taste. They were a 'highly musical people' with 'high sense of rhythm' and 'great vitality', he said, so only dances 'with quick movements will have an appeal to them'. Thus, Bharat Natyam, a staple of Indian dance diplomacy, had to be ruled out because of its 'highly stylised and intricate' movements. Indian classical music would not work for the same reasons. Instead, he recommended a troupe that consisted of '(1) fast moving ballet of Kathak dancers preferably female, (2) a good singer of folk music ... and (3) percussion instrument players', since the 'drum occupied a very important place in West Africa'. Haksar also made clear that these recommendations would hold good for other West African states 'like Ghana, Mali, Dahomey etc.' and repeated his view that women performers were preferable (presumably on account of a similarity in this regard with Egyptians).[69]

This view of Africans was not atypical among Indian mandarins. 'For the African countries that we have in view', Miss V. Kitchlu of the Education Ministry wrote to N.P. Alexander at the Ministry of External Affairs the next year, 'it is perhaps better to send a troupe consisting of popular dancers rather than classical dancers'.[70] In the summer of 1962, Haksar wrote from Lagos once again to underscore the importance of receiving a 'Song and Dance Ensemble' from India. When it came to recommending the nature of the performances, he suggested that it be borne in mind that 'The African race, as is well known, has a tremendous sense of rhythm' and so the visiting party should feature items that are 'fast moving and yet represent a genuine Indian style

[65]Vineet Thakur, Pavan Kumar, and Kalathmika Natarajan, 'The Caste of Diplomacy', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 20 (2025): 377–404, 378, 379, 385.

[66]F. No. 7(80)-A.W.T.I. (Secret), MEA, NAI.

[67]Ibid.

[68]F. No. 4(54)-FEA/56, MEA, NAI.

[69]F. No. Cul-18/60/Afr.II, MEA, NAI.

[70]Ibid.

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and tradition'.[71] Other Indian ambassadors also held similar views of Africans and dance. Former Indian representative to Beijing and then Moscow, K.P.S. Menon reflected on three months spent in East Africa as an Indian Civil Service officer in 1934: 'All the tribes in Africa had one thing in common—their sense of rhythm. They loved dancing … They seemed to dance out of their mother's wombs and go on dancing until they danced into their tombs.'[72]

The nebulous, ad hoc international sociology of taste—about the suitability of particular Indian dances to specific audiences based on racial proclivity, national character, intelligence, cultural orientation, or class—was not limited to Indian bureaucrats. It appears to have been shared among the country's dance critics as well. In the summer of 1955, for instance, after viewing a dress-rehearsal in the capital by the Indian cultural delegation that would soon be headed to China, the ballet critic for an Indian newspaper held forth on what kinds of dances were best targeted to Chinese audiences. They were, for example, much more likely to warm to Indian dances than the 'strange strains of classical music', however admirable Indians might find the latter. Among dance forms, they were inclined to delight in Indrani Rahman's Bharat Natyam—'so superb that its sheer loveliness could be grasped by the Bantu and Hottentot, let alone the cultured Chinese'. To this bluntly racist discernment, the nameless critic added another judgement that repeated the association of rapidity of movement with levels of cultural sophistication. Manipuri dances were also likely to play well because 'there is something in the dignified slowness of the gestures … that is Chinese in character'.[73]

Catering to audience proclivities could, however, impose its own limits and render the purpose of cultural projection ambiguous. The discretion afforded to foreign bureaucrats led, on at least one occasion, to the Ministry of External Affairs receiving a cultural assessment it did not want to hear. Not every diplomat was convinced of the utility of dance diplomacy. From Accra in March 1963, High Commissioner Jagdish Chand Kakkar communicated that, 'Our classical music and dancing represent a totally different tradition and the tremendous westernisation of African taste has got to be taken into account.' He clarified that this was not a rejection of the 'intrinsic value or excellence of Indian music and dancing' but 'we are dealing with cultural investment and return—intrinsic value has very little to do with it'. By this logic, the Indian government should solely cater to audience interest and appetite. Seemingly questioning a pillar of post-colonial cultural diplomacy, he later concluded that there were very few peoples in the world, outside the sub-continent, who appreciated Indian dances and music. It was 'not unpatriotic' to admit as much.[74] Kakkar, however, was the exception that proved the rule.

The state sought to project Indian culture across the world, but the version varied based on these perceptions of different places. China and Japan, coded as advanced cultures, required (or deserved) classical maestros. It was deemed beyond the capacity of West Africans to savour similar, classical offerings: the performances for them (if at all) had to be less stylized, quicker, and more rhythmic. And Indian cultural diplomacy to Africans, like with Arabs, it would appear, had to foreground women.

Once the kind of dance that would be best suited to the foreign audience was ascertained, attention turned to which dancers would represent the country optimally. Often, the process of determining this involved male bureaucratic regulation of female artists, their bodies, and behaviours. As the following episodes underline, women, when deployed as vessels of cultural nationalism, danced on a tightrope. As Mrinalini Sinha has shown, women are often 'constructed as the "bodyguards" of a culture'; hence the 'preponderance of female personifications in

[71]Letter from P.N. Haksar to A.K. Ghosh, 10 July 1962, F. No. Cul-18/60/Afr.II, MEA, NAI.
[72]K.P.S. Menon, *Many Worlds: An Autobiography* (Oxford University Press, 1965), 126.
[73]'Cultural Delegation to China', 1 June 1955, unidentified newspaper article, Indrani Rahman Papers.
[74]F. No. Cul-18/60/Afr.II, MEA, NAI.

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representations of the nation', whether in Germany, France, or India.[75] Female Indian dancers had to be perceived as attractive enough to be pleasing to male-dominated audiences, but not so attractive as to sully 'ancient' tradition and national culture with the erotic. Femininity was an asset, sexuality a liability.[76]

In 1957, the Indian government was in dialogue with the Soviet Union about cultural exchanges. While Moscow had expressed interest in hosting a range of arts and artists, from puppet theatre to paintings to theatre experts and professors, New Delhi thought it best to limit it to a 'delegation of workers of Indian art and Indian artists' alongside 'a really good Bharatnatyam dancer'.[77] The Indian Embassy in Moscow recommended pruning the former category and adding more dancers. At the head of the Embassy was K.P.S. Menon, a ceaseless promoter of cultural diplomacy in general and dance diplomacy in particular. Urbane, Oxford educated, Menon was a powerful diplomat—India's first Foreign Secretary, then its first ambassador to China, and subsequently a Padma Bhushan awardee. He regarded himself a dance connoisseur, and was apparently treated as such by his government, taking charge of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (the national music and dance academy) between 1972 and 1977, and even authoring a book on Kathakali.

Having bemoaned the lack of even more dancers on earlier cultural delegations to the Soviet Union, Menon was keen to ensure that his priorities were reflected in the next volley of artists from India. In correspondence from winter 1957 to autumn 1958, he persistently conveyed his preference for fewer 'workers in the fields of theatre, literature and publishing' and more dancers. Menon believed that they could act as a diplomatic counterweight in the Cold War. '[s]ince we seem to be veering more and more to the West in the economic sphere'.[78]

Unbeknownst to Menon, over the course of October 1958, the Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs instead decided to swap Kamala Laxman, the dancer originally proposed, out for T. Balasaraswati. A Padma Bhushan honoree in 1957, Balasarawati was one of the few low-caste hereditary performers from the former *devadasi* tradition (of the Isai Vellalar community) to become a Bharatnatyam star and cultural icon. Though she traced her ancestry back to Papammal, a dancer-singer in the eighteenth-century Thanjavur court, *The Statesman* hailed her as 'the very first flower of the dance renaissance' in the twentieth.[79]

Menon did not respond well to the surprise switch, venting in a manner that deserves extensive quotation:

> Balasaraswati will not go down well in the Soviet Union. She is everything that, in Soviet eyes, a dancer should not be just as Kamla (sic) Laxman is everything that a dancer should be.
>
> I understand that Balasaraswati is past her prime. So, you may say, is Ulanova [Russian ballerina]. But Ulanova is still a feather-weight, but Balasaraswati can compete for a heavy weight championship. This, you may say, has not affected the splendour of her movements. But, after all, the average man goes to the theatre not merely to see the dance but the dancer. In any case, to a Soviet audience, the Bharat Natyam will be somewhat outlandish. If it is performed by a young and graceful dancer, it will have the lure of the exotic; if performed by

[75]Mrinalini Sinha, 'Gender and Nation', in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 256. For an overview within South Asian history see Neloufer de Mel, 'Gender and Nation in South Asia: Feminist Positions, Scholarship and Directions', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, ed. David Ludden (online edition, Oxford Academic, 27 February 2017–), accessed 9 March 2026, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.752.

[76]For something of a contrast, where sexuality was not entirely a liability—because 'American freedom' could be contrasted to Soviet censorship—see Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 107, 114.

[77]F. No. 13-57/Eur.E/57, MEA, NAI.

[78]Letter from K.P.S. Menon to Samar Sen, 13 September 1958, F. 13/38/Eur. E/58, MEA, NAI.

[79]Douglas M. Knight, *Balasaraswati: Her Art and Life* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 160.

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> a heavy and middle-aged person, it will merely have the repulsion of the strange. Indrani Rahman is present here. Though, in sheer virtuosity, she may not be anywhere near Balasaraswati, she has created an excellent impression, simply by the grace of her personality. The reverse will be the impression if Balasaraswati comes.
>
> I would request you to see that the idea of sending Balasaraswati's troupe is dropped. If there is any obligation to send her abroad, let her go to South East Asia, the Middle East or Africa where her attributes and proportions will have more admirers.[80]

Knotted in this sexist, intemperate letter were the arbitrary strands through which government officials, diplomats, and bureaucrats wove dance diplomacy. Here was, once again, the international sociology of taste in operation. The Soviets (like the Japanese) supposedly deserved, and were capable of appreciating, classical performances of Bharatnatyam. In fact, this was precisely why Menon petitioned so hard for classical dancers to be sent. However, according to him, there were strict corporeal limits to Russian taste. His issue was not just that the forty-year-old Balasaraswati was 'past her prime' in years; he also believed that she was past prime in proportion as well—comparing her physique unfavourably to the Russian ballerina Galina Ulanova.

Crudity apart, the letter reveals a lack of confidence, even from this votary of Indian dance, about the ability of an indigenous dance form to travel well across borders. Menon believed that Bharat Natyam would be 'outlandish' to Russian eyes, even if performed by arguably the greatest living exponent of it. Even the bizarre could be fascinating, he averred, if the conduit was 'young and graceful'; but it could also descend into the grotesque if relayed by someone 'heavy and middle-aged'. It is telling that Menon went on to compare Balasaraswati with Indrani Rahman, the petite, twenty-eight-year-old former beauty pageant winner.

Was dance diplomacy meant to convey the heights of Indian culture (such as it was construed), or was the point to find the most attractive vehicles of it? And did what constituted 'the best' have to be modified based on local taste and capacities? Menon's note ends with a reiteration of the global differentiation (and hierarchy) of tastes. Given his sexist judgement of Balasaraswati's age and looks, it is not hard to guess what he thought of the aesthetics of people in 'South East Asia, or the Middle East or Africa where her attributes and proportions will have more admirers'.

The recipients of this letter in New Delhi responded by indulging Menon. Balasaraswati was informed just days before departure that she and her accompanists (whom she had had a difficult time persuading about this international trip) need not travel any longer. When the government contacted her to cancel, they told her that it was to 'save her the humiliation' of not being received enthusiastically. Left unstated was how the government believed it was actually (on the word of one man) saving the national image from humiliation. The experience, according to her biographer, left her hurt, 'very angry and mistrustful' of the government.[81]

The Indian state found itself in another conflict with a dancer that year. This incident is revelatory of the official attitude towards national honour and shame, the ways foreign media reports could shape diplomatic considerations, and how artists acted as agents themselves, using their celebrity and status as designated cultural ambassadors for self-promotion (though never entirely escaping male constraints on their agency).

'The attached papers tell a most disgraceful and humiliating story', the Ministry of External Affairs file began. Joint Secretary Samar Sen was expressing his lament about dancer Vyjayanthimala during her recitals in Paris in late spring 1959. After Balasaraswati had been ignominiously dropped earlier in the year, the government eventually settled on sending Vyjayanthimala and her troupe on an extended tour of 'classical dances' covering Eastern Europe

[80]F. 13(104) Eur. E/59, MEA, NAI.
[81]Knight, *Balasarawati*, 178.

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and the USSR, piggybacking on her existing tour in Western Europe.[82] A trained dancer and movie star, Vyjayanthimala had been picked by K.P. S. Menon as Balasaraswati's replacement.[83]

Performing at a variety of venues in Western Europe, funded by ticket sales and assisted by a small grant from her government, Vyjayanthimala and her troupe of three had landed in Paris on 24 May 1959, checking into the luxuriously appointed George V Hotel (today, The Four Seasons George V). Two weeks later, M.S. Sait, the Indian chargé d'affaires in Paris, sent a panicked letter to New Delhi, along with a sixteen-page report whose contents were so dire that the Indian government had to consider whether they could proceed with sending Vyjayanthimala to the Soviet Union as a cultural ambassador. She had been 'discredited', it claimed, and worse, 'some of this discredit has been reflected on the Government of India'.[84]

The Madras-born star was in Paris to perform at the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre des Nations for five performances at the end of May. The august venue was, according to the report, a 'semi-Governmental institution whose object is to give an opportunity to all countries to make their culture known in France'. The theatre usually left it up to the various invited nations to select the dancers to represent them. As a result, these performances, which regularly received wide publicity, were viewed by the French as reflecting not just the dancer and their troupe, but also the national government that 'sponsored' them. With Vyjayanthimala having secured 1,000 rupees from the government of India—which New Delhi thought of as merely a 'token grant', taking no further responsibility for the performance—the Theatres de Nations assumed she was an official representative. The Indian government had unwittingly entered a situation with greater reputational stakes than it had realized.

The Indian chargés d'affaires claimed that Vyjayanthimala and her management (including her father) were making the most of the misunderstanding. They 'have been going about calling themselves "an Indian Cultural Delegation" (which is taken to mean an "official Indian Cultural Delegation")'. And because she had been panned by critics and journalists, he continued, the Indian government was 'copiously blamed' for sending such a 'mediocre gang of dancers, completely unrepresentative of Indian dancing traditions, "to represent India" in a cultural centre to which all other countries have always ... only sent their best'.[85] China, in glaring contrast, had only recently delivered a command performance.

What had French journalists said that was so damaging to India? The report slotted the criticisms into four categories: (1) 'introduction of Western music', (2) 'except for the Bharat Natyam itself, the dances were neither Eastern nor Western', (3) 'suggestiveness, vulgarity and obscenity', and (4) 'general inferiority' and 'playing to the gallery, sometimes voluptuously'. More specifically, *Liberation* regretted the 'sensuous cheerfulness ... caring very little for esoteric symbolism or chaste mysticism'. *Combat* asked, 'is it not Hollywood rather than Madras that comes to us?', referring to the South Indian city most associated with Bharatanatyam. The troupe entertained 'with their hints of vulgarity and provoking airs' known world over to 'attract spectators in night clubs!' Instead of channelling the 'purest' dance traditions of her country, Vyjayanthimala had introduced improvisations that were in 'bad taste meant to seduce the audience'. *Le Monde* was no kinder: 'why has India sent a film star to represent her'? It questioned how this choreography—by 'dressed up dolls dazzling with diamonds as unreal as their acting'—related to the 'classic tradition' reflected in the 'Natya Shastra [the ancient Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts], which has been followed through the ages by generations of dancers in spite of wars and foreign invasions'. Antoine Golea wondered in *Carrefour* at how this troupe was chosen by 'our Indian friends to represent their country!' Vyjayanthimala 'lowers and coarsens' Indian

[82]F. No. 13/5/Eur. E/59, MEA, NAI.

[83]F. No. 13 (28) Eur. (E)/59, MEA, NAI.

[84]Letter from M.S. Sait to S. Sen, 8 June 1959, F. No. 13/5/Eur. E/59, MEA, NAI.

[85]'Note on visit of Vyjayantimala and her troupe to Paris in May/June, 1959', compiled by M.S. Sait, 8 June 1959, F. No. 13/5/Eur. E/59, MEA, NAI.

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dance when she did not 'distort it', turning 'a sacred art into a bad night-club floor show'. In *Figaro*, her dance was deemed more secular than spiritual, and *France Soir* judged the dancers ('pretty if not beautiful') to have an 'exotic charm' but none of the 'mystery' of the East.[86]

Based on the chargé d'affaires' enquiries, some of this antipathy was likely attributable to 'gaucherie, lack of savoir faire and frequent irritability and brusqueness' on the part of Vyjayanthimala's management. Sait added that the behaviour he heard about seemed credible given that he and the Indian Embassy had also been on the receiving end of their impertinence. Among the many discourtesies that had ticked off local journalists was vastly exaggerating her association with Nehru.[87]

The entire unfortunate episode, Sait concluded, 'reflected back on India ... because of the incessant self-description of the troupe as "an Indian Cultural Delegation" ... sent out personally by no less a personality than the Indian Prime Minister himself'. And while this might not have been ordinarily credible, the mere existence of a token grant to the troupe had 'lent credence to its tales'. French dance critics were, according to him, not unfavourably disposed towards Indian dances—evident in their responses to several other visiting dancers over the past years—nor were they ignorant of it. The issue was squarely, in Sait's view, with the troupe, whose behaviour was such a contrast with that of the 'smoothness and decorum' of the Chinese troupe, resulting in a 'complete and roaring success for the Chinese'.[88]

When the report reached New Delhi, it set off a chain of anguished official hand-wringing. 'Considerable harm has already been done', the Joint Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, Samar Sen, wrote to colleagues. 'But this is not the end of our trouble', he ominously continued. He had learned that this very troupe (with further accompanying dancers) was to travel to the USSR, Czechoslovakia, and perhaps Poland, on an official visit. The cost to the exchequer this time would be up to twenty-five times the earlier token grant. But the steeper cost would be to the country's image. Sen recommended that 'we should prevent this troupe from going'.[89] He sent a telegram (marked 'Secret') to the ambassadors in Moscow and Prague appraising them of the situation and informing them that New Delhi was seriously considering cancelling Vyjayanthimala's trip, but asking them to report back on the potential diplomatic blowback from such a last-minute cancellation.[90]

The response from Moscow and Prague was swift and unequivocal: the dancer's tour could not be cancelled (again) without consequences. Settling the matter was a note signed by the Prime Minister himself: 'Vyjayantimala's programme should not be changed.'[91]

A collective sigh of relief is likely to have been detected at the External Affairs Ministry at the end of July when Menon's report on Vyjayanthimala's troupe's performances landed on their desks. The twelve-member dancing party had spent nearly three weeks in the Soviet Union, giving three performances in Moscow, six in Tashkent, and one in Samarkand, received by the public with 'much enthusiasm'. Explaining away the 'violently critical' response of the French press, Menon, ever the advocate of dance diplomacy, suggested that 'the mere fact that the French art world found it necessary to indulge in such a bitter controversy' indicated that Indian dance was 'a subject which deserved more than ordinary interest'.[92]

Upon her return, Vyjayanthimala seemed unperturbed, if she was even aware, about the preceding diplomatic angst. Meeting with a reporter in the lounge of the capital's Ashoka hotel, she spoke with pride of her two-month tour of Britain, the Continent, and the Soviet Union. 'I have made a name, you know.' Her only regret was missing out on meeting personalities such as

[86]Ibid.
[87]Ibid.
[88]Ibid.
[89]Ibid.
[90]F. No. 13/5/Eur. E/59, MEA, NAI.
[91]Note by Jawaharlal Nehru, 26 June 1959, F. No. 13/5/Eur. E/59, MEA, NAI.
[92]Note by K.P.S. Menon, 31 July 1959, F. No. 13/5/Eur. E/59, MEA, NAI.

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Khruschev and Lady Mountbatten. As she was about to make her way back to her hotel room, she conveyed what the reporter believed 'she had apparently been trying long to say'. Likely hoping that her words reached their intended (prime ministerial) mark, the future Congress parliamentarian said that wherever she travelled, she was surrounded by affectionate people 'as much because they liked her as for the fact she came from "Nehru's India"'.[93]

An enterprising, famous movie star like Vyjayanthimala could, as this episode reveals, exercise a lot more agency than someone in Balasarawati's position. Even so, it is equally apparent that female artists—even matinee idols—operated within real limitations largely determined by male mandarins who decided what form 'Indian' culture should take beyond its borders.

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, the prospects for dance to be a vehicle of national honour on the global stage must have seemed remote. Rejected by elites, professional dancing was deemed disreputable in no small part on account of the social status of its low-caste practitioners. The transformation in elite nationalist attitudes to dance recoded it from shame to pride. A crucial figure in this step, taking Indian dancing (or 'Hindu ballet') beyond India's colonial borders, was Uday Shankar who, from the 1920s onward was able to channel the diffuse fascination with the 'exotic', 'the Orient', and the 'East' towards creating an international market—complete with paying audiences and media interest—for his dancing mélange, based on his own rediscovery of India. Indian dance's popularity abroad advanced its reappraisal at home.

Culture, long the subject of anti-colonial nationalists' attention across the Global South, was recognized as an arena crucial to substantive decolonization and post-colonial nation-building. When Independence came, the government of post-colonial India, seeing dance's potential, built atop the labours of dancers and began to sponsor it as part of its cultural diplomacy. Very soon, with the notable exception of religious conservatives, much of the country's political leadership and civil society warmed to the idea (even as it often remained critical of implementation). Dance became the centrepiece of Indian cultural diplomacy during the first two decades of the republic.

Along with this new mode of diplomacy came questions that do not appear to have ever been resolved, offering insights into the anxieties of the Indian state. Was the culture exhibited abroad meant to reflect what the Indian government believed to be authentic and worthy of celebration, or was it supposed to ultimately please and entertain foreign audiences? If it was the former, then which current dance forms passed this purity test and claim to millennia of unbroken tradition, given the twentieth-century reinvention of most Indian dance styles? And if the latter—if cultural diplomacy was indeed ultimately a form of catering to local tastes across the globe—then how were aesthetic preferences in different parts of the world to be determined?

This article has sought to present a range of responses to these questions by Indian governments, revealing deep-seated attitudes and biases. Among the government's foreign service establishment, a common mode of operation was to segment the world based on an unstated but shared international sociology of taste and cultural achievement, making Bharatnatyam appropriate for East Asia but not Africa. It was a view rooted in firm beliefs about Indian culture's own exalted status within this hierarchical matrix.

While debates about which Indian culture to showcase abroad were conducted within the government, they were influenced by responses from civil society, parliamentary debates, and even the foreign press. As the discussion of criticisms in Parliament and in foreign media revealed, the Indian government was always insecure about how the nation was perceived, especially sensitive to charges of inauthenticity, sexuality, and vulgarity—anything suggesting that Indian dance (and by extension Indian art and culture itself) evoked cabaret halls and movies rather than the *Natya Shastra*. And though the state was predictably the most powerful player in the realm of diplomacy

[93]'Dancer's Triumphant Tour of the West', *Hindustan Times*, 22 July 1959, 4.

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(individual diplomats often subjecting the nation's diplomacy to their own prejudices), artists exercised agency in advancing their careers (sometimes to their government's chagrin).

Exploring this history reveals a significant but overlooked channel through which a poor, recently decolonized nation sought to assert itself internationally. Though focused on India, this article has sought to demonstrate how debates over national culture in the once colonized world are part of the global history of decolonization. The arguments about what constituted a national culture took place just as it was being integrated into a growing global field of cultural engagement and competition. The resulting national culture, debated though it was, did not acquire its form within the country's borders and then journey abroad; it took shape in transit.

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Nikhil Menon is Associate Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *Planning Democracy: Modern India's Quest for Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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