

Impact of Arts on the Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Health

Vasanta Lakshmi Chivukula & Sweta Prasad Inupakuttika**

Abstract

The performing arts have been a part of Indian culture and society as a means of rituals in temples, entertainment for people, and also for cultural unification. The use of these art forms in promoting health and healing processes has coexisted throughout human evolution. Many scientists and spiritual leaders have demonstrated the positive impact of these art forms on human lives. Here we attempt a succinct presentation of the benefits of these arts in the holistic health and healing process. This paper focuses specifically on two art forms: music and dance. Music with its instantaneous gratification, and dance with its high impact visual form have the power to exemplify creativity and help reach higher realms.

Keywords: Music Therapy, Dance Therapy, Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Health

*co-authors: Dance and Music teachers at Pravinya Arts Academy, LLC

✉ vasanta.chivukula@gmail.com ; iswetaprasad@gmail.com>

“Gītām, Vādyam, Tathā Nrityam Trayam Sangītamuchyate”- a quote from Sangīta Ratnākara aptly describes the relationship between music and dance. It says Gītām, the song, Vādyam, the instruments, and Nrityam, the dance, all three together form Sangītam. Humans express their emotions through sound, gesture, or words. According to Jespersen, a philologist, “dance and song are the most natural, pre linguistic activities of the human mind. They are a logical herald of the later, discursively expressive functions of the mind and harbingers of language” (Jespersen, 1983). Art has been a way of expression for humans from time immemorial, wherein dance and music are cultural staples that bring cohesiveness within the diverse cultural and linguistic backdrop of India.

Music

Indian literature attributes the creation of music to the Vedas, especially the Sāmaveda. This music derived from the Sāmaveda is called Gāndharvaveda or Gāndharvagāna. However, it wasn't in the form of the music that we hear today; it was in the form of religious hymns that were chanted at the time of yagna (sacrificial ritual). These hymns developed with time and became a method of expression much like spoken language. It further evolved into a complex system of rāgās - the sequential arrangement of selected notes in varying combinations that produces a melody.

As Neeraja Bhatnagar mentioned in her book *Evolution of Indian Classical Music*, “Music is never static” (Bhatnagar, 1997). It is always flowing and is up to the senses of the creator to get creative. Sounds in the natural surroundings have had great impact on human senses and aesthetics and has contributed immensely towards development of music. According to Rik Pratisākhyā and Nāradeya Śikṣā, music evolved from nature (Shakatayana, 2014). Darwin too suggested that music

evolved from the cries and calls of birds and animals (Darwin, 1871). It took higher order human creativity and belief in divine intervention to convert these cries into melodic expressions.

In India, the genesis of all fine arts is attributed to the ‘Ḍamaru’ of Śiva as the first sound, or Nādam, and the ‘Ai un Alruk’ akṣarās find their origin from the Ḍamaru. This is very well incorporated in Sri Balamurali Krishna’s Garuḍadhvani Thillana where he says – “tājjaritajharita ḌamarukadhvanijaAi un Alrukityadyakṣara srṣṭi kṛakam”, it’s the damaruka which is the source for all the letters or akṣara(s). The waves of sound are called Śabda Brahman or Nāda Brahman, thus attributing divinity to sound and music. The Gāndharvagānam is a combination of Svara, Rāga, and Tāla. Svara is the shape around a note or a pitch, Rāga is the collection of notes or svarās that provide a melody to the ear and Tāla is the meter or the rhythm. So, the cries and calls of birds and animals have evolved into melodic sounds with proper usage of Svara, Rāga, and Tāla by humans.

Music is a fundamental attribute of the human species, which enhances the overall human health and performance. In every era of human history and in every culture around the globe, music has been a language to communicate and has allowed people to express their deepest feelings. More than simply expressing emotions, music also has the power to alter them. Bright and cheerful music, for instance can make people feel happy, energetic and lift the moods of people feeling depressed. Several research studies have shown that music can cause changes in moods instantly and are long lasting.

The curative aspect of “rāga” has been thoroughly researched throughout the rise of the Āyurvedic era (circa 6000 BCE) and continues to be the center of many studies on music-related therapies. *Rāg Chikitsa* is an ancient Indian treatise on musicology replete with information on the cognitive impact of notes, rhythm, and microtones, three very important aspects in music, in

various permutations and combinations. The ancient system of Nāda Yoga (the concept that the entire cosmos and all that exists within vibrates at varying frequencies) fully acknowledged the profound impact music has on the body and psyche (Sanivarapu, 2015).

Music as therapy

Music therapy uses aspects of music to improve physical and psychological well-being in humans (Bagchi, 2003). These therapies may involve listening to music, singing along, playing an instrument and moving to the rhythm. Different methods involving music are used to treat several conditions like anxiety disorders, depression, dementia, behavioral and psychiatric disorders, and others. Along with voice, instruments like singing bowls, tuning forks, pan flute and harp are used in music therapies. Many hospitals, rehab clinics, outpatient clinics, schools, and correctional facilities use different music programs to help meet the physical, emotional, and cognitive needs of patients.

It is estimated that there are over four lakh rāgās in Indian classical music. While many are repetitive in their basic notes, they vary in terms of melody and style. Each rāga was created and structured in a specific way to benefit physical and mental health apart from other employments.

- Rāgās like ĀhirBhairav, Dvijāvanti, Kharaharapriya, and Gānamūrti are found to be beneficial in curing diseases and disorders
- Rāgas like Bhūpāla, Des, Kīravāṇi, and Kedāram promote spiritual awareness and meditative practices
- Rāgas like Ṣaṇmukhapriya, Śubhapantuvarāḷi, Kāpi, and Cārukeśi spark intellectuality and alleviate tension by promoting positive energy (Deekshitulu, 2014)

Music and Spirituality

Aside from its clear physical and psychological benefits, music is one of the most powerful gateways to connect to spiritual nature. It is a consistent and dependable way to connect and restore inner balance.

Every note in a musical scale corresponds to a particular *chakra*. *Chakras* are energy junctions that influence our mind. Normal sound vibrates through the body feeding the chakras with energy: positive and negative. However, music releases the negative energy that blocks the chakras as positive energy flows through the body. This release of negative energy and influx of positive energy in chakras keeps the energy fields balanced and keeps the mind in a calm state. Whether it is Vedic mantras, devotional bhajans, Beethoven symphonies, gospel hymns, or the Namaaz, each genre of music has a specific frequency and rhythm that impacts the body and the mind in equal measure. If words are limited language of the mind, music is its limitless manifestation.

Dance

Gestural movements, mostly unstructured, have been used to communicate emotions in the early period of human evolution. When these movements became structured and aesthetically pleasing it resulted in dance (Anderson, 1974). Anderson further adds that dance is not just visual but is kinesthetic, appealing to our emotions.

Sanskrit texts written in the 2nd century AD describe dance in India making the Indian classical dance one of the oldest dancing traditions in the world. It evolved over the centuries imbibing the changing Indian spiritual and political diaspora, moving from temples to courts, as a part of sacred rituals in temples to the entertainment of kings and commoners. Even though dance is directed towards an external audience, there is a tremendous amount of inner discipline

involved to integrate the inner and outer elements and bring out a comprehensive experience. This is accomplished by bringing the physical, mental, and spiritual elements together which are treated as one whole in dance. Indian dance, whether classical or folk, explored human life in multiple facets. Thus, expression in these dance forms can be the literal presentation of the central theme or a means to reach a higher spiritual state or inner bliss or Satcidānanda.

The goal of most Indian art forms is the attainment of *moksha* or salvation. This can be achieved only through discipline of the body, mind, and the spirit. Most Indian classical dances follow the Nāṭya Sāstra, the most authoritative text on dramaturgy, for the physical posture and body movements. Nāṭya Sāstra describes three categories of dance - Nriṭṭa, Nritya, and Nāṭya. Nriṭṭa, pure dance, focuses mainly on the body movements and gestures, thus emphasizing the physical form. Nritya, a combination of physical movements and expressions, is more emotional nature. Nāṭya is the dramatic dance where the abhinaya or expression dominates this category and can be a means of achieving the spiritual element. The amalgamation of Nriṭṭa, Nritya, and Nāṭya practiced in daily life brings in a holistic wellbeing of a person unifying body, mind, and spirit.

Dance: Physical and Mental Health

Dance therapy - Dance is used as a psychotherapeutic tool for healing. This dwells in the concept that mind, and body are inseparable (Levy, 2005, p. 1). Many studies provide the basis for dance having a positive therapeutic effect on the body, mind, and spirit of a human being (Parker, 2006; Lopez, 2007; Rea, 2004). Dance therapy is based on the premise that the body movements are based on emotional condition and thus the changes in the movements are based on the mood of the person, thus, promoting health of a person. By uniting the body, mind and spirit, dance brings in the wholeness and hence helps in the process of healing.

While focusing on dealing with communicable diseases and its control, mental health and mental illness have been neglected, believing it to be a curse or sin, especially in India. Mental afflictions have also exacerbated other violent crimes in the society. These issues must be addressed urgently to reduce the negative effect on society. Even though use of dance and music as psychotherapeutic healing was not well known in specific medical/health fields in India until recently (Kumar, n.d.), it has been in vogue in the Western world for a long time.

In many cultures, dance is an essential part of life just as other biological needs. Singh said that any movement to be considered therapeutic must be enjoyable and expressive, must include elements of toning the muscles, symmetry in the movement, strengthen the vital organs such as heart and lungs, and should include the brain and nervous system to improve the alertness (Singh, 2006).

Evaluating students of Bharatanatyam over time it was found that training in this classical dance influenced heart rate, sequential perception, and finger agnosia. The mudras used in dance are also spiritual in nature as they are used in recitation of mantras or hymns. Indian classical dances use the movement of most muscles in the body thus strengthening the heart. The changes in the movements between brisk nritta and softer abhinaya portions aids in alternating the aerobic and anaerobic activity building the heart and the lung strength.

Movement medicine – it is a contemporary freestyle dancing. It is a way to connect deeply with oneself, with others and with nature. While movement medicine as a prevention and cure for diseases has its roots in early history from China to India to Greece, it has lost its importance as more state-of-the-art medicines have found their way in the society. Of late, the concept of movement medicine is gaining recognition again as people are trying to avoid the synthetic drugs and gaining more insights into keeping body and mind healthy using more ancient, natural, and

traditional ways. Thus, movement therapy is gaining importance and dancing as a means of movement is being recognized and imbibed.

Physician Jane Thornton's research shows that physical activity influences up to 30 chronic diseases. Dancing is a wonderful physical activity that brings body, mind, and spirit together having an impact not just on physical ailments but has an impact on mental health. Kieft used a combination of hermeneutic and ethnographic methods to study the contribution of movement medicine to wellbeing and found that people used it for self-actualization and spiritual realization (Kieft 2014).

Vibrational medicine or energy medicine is another approach to holistic therapy concept that uses performing arts, fine arts, yoga, meditation, and acupuncture. Vibrational therapy is assumed to initiate healing at cellular level, thus promoting youthfulness and longevity. Using bare feet to dance brings in acupressure to certain areas that would enhance the mental and physical health (Bajaj, 2016).

Dance and the mind - Dance requires a complex mental coordination. Coordinated movements, especially music stimulate our brain's reward centers. Dance on the other hand activates its sensory and motor circuits. John Krakauer, a neurologist from Columbia University states that the motor cortex, somatosensory cortex, basal ganglia and cerebellum are seen to contribute to dance learning. Researchers at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine discovered that dance can improve brain health. Out of 11 different physical activities such as golfing, cycling, playing tennis etc., only dance lowered the risk of dementia (Verghese, 2003).

The sloka from NāṭyaSāstra, yato hasta stato driṣṭiḥi states that the eyes always follow the hands. The hands are used to depict mudras and the eyes are used to express various emotions. This improves the hand-eye coordination. The horizontal saccadic movements of the

eyes also improve memory (Parker, 2013). Additionally, disorders such as Alzheimer's, Dementia etc., though cannot be reversed may be delayed by using the eye movements that are so common in Indian Classical dances. It is also established that the Angabhāva, the movements of the limbs and the Tālabhāva, the act of keeping the musical measure engage both the right and left parts of the brain, thus improving the holistic health of the brain (Oak, 1970).

Dance: Spiritual Health

Spirituality is, knowing your inner self and inner potential. The evolution of Indian dances is very much integrated in the fabric of Indian philosophy and spirituality. It is identified as a means for Ātma (soul) to reach Paramātmā (the God). Indian Classical dances use Āngika (gestures), Vācika (recitation, music), Āhārya (costume and stage setting), and Sāttvika (mental disposition) abhinaya to express the spiritual ideas.

Indian dance has been a part of rituals in many temples from ancient times. Dancers used gestures to depict the hymns. They performed baliharaṇa (one of the five daily sacrifices performed by Hindus) invoking the Aṣṭadikpālākās, or the God's of the eight directions and entertained the deity. They became the vāradhi or bridge between the Āgama chant and the devotee.

Even today majority of the dance performances revolve around songs praying Gods, illustrating their might, or simply presenting a story from epics and Purāṇās. These stories are so assimilated into the life fabric of Indians that it makes it easier even for a layman to understand and connect to these presentations. Dance performances are used as a means for entertainment as well as bringing people closer to God and spirituality.

References

- Anderson, J. (1974). *Dance*. New York: Newsweek Books.
- Bagchi, K. (2003). *Music, mind, and mental health*. New Delhi: Society for Gerontological Research.
- Bajaj, T. (2016). *Performing Arts and Therapeutic Implications*. Published by Routledge India. ISBN 9781138660106
- Deekshitulu, Balajai (2014). *Stress Reduction through Listening Indian Classical Music*. *Innovare Journal of Health Sciences*. Vol 2. Issue 2.
- Jespersen, O. (1983)[1895]. *Progress in Language*. Amsterdam Classics in Linguistics, 17. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Kieft, E. (2014). *Dance as a moving spirituality: A case study of Movement Medicine*. *Dance Movement & Spiritualities*. DOI: 10.1386/dmas.1.1.21_1
- Kumar, A. (n.d). *Mental health in a public health perspective*. Bihar Times. Retrieved from http://d30045992.purehost.com/articles/anant/mental_health.html
- Levy, F. J. (2005). *Dance movement therapy: A healing art* (2nd ed.). Reston, VA: American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.
- López, P.W. (2007). *The use of the Puerto Rican folk dance Bomba in dance/movement therapy for women survivors of domestic violence* (Unpublished master's thesis). Columbia College Chicago, IL.
- Oak, R. (1970). *The physical, psychological and intellectual benefits of Kathak learning*. Retrieved from <http://nrityavichar.blogspot.com/2018/03/the-physical-psychologicaland.html>

- Parker, A. (2013). Effects of Saccadic Bilateral Eye Movements on Episodic and Semantic Autobiographical Memory Fluency. *Front Hum Neurosci.* 2013; 7: 630. doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2013.00630
- Parker, I. (2006). Dance/movement therapy and traditional dance in a Ugandan 63 community: The expressive and healing properties of movement in a traumatized country (Unpublished master's thesis). Columbia College Chicago, IL.
- Rea, W. (2004). Ethnic dance: Connections to body, mind and spirit (Unpublished master's thesis). Columbia College Chicago, IL.
- Sanivarapu, S. (2015). India's rich musical heritage has a lot to offer to modern psychiatry. *Indian J Psychiatry.* doi: 10.4103/0019-5545.158201
- Singh, L. G. (2006). Looking glass: Islands of despair, islands of hope. *Sangeet Natak*, 40(1), 80-88.
- Sudhakar, K. (2006). The therapeutic value of Indian classical dance. *Sangeet Natak*, 40, 26-38.
- Thornton, J (2016). Physical activity prescription: a critical opportunity to address a modifiable risk factor for the prevention and management of chronic disease: a position statement by the Canadian Academy of Sport and Exercise Medicine. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2016; 50 1099-1099 Published Online First: 01 Sep 2016. doi: 10.1136/bjsports-2016-096755
- Verghese, J. (2003). Leisure Activities and the Risk of Dementia in the Elderly. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 2003; 348:2508-2516 DOI: 10.1056/NEJMoa022252