



Relationship between Indian Classical Dance Forms and Psychological Well-Being : A Review

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Abstract: Indian classical dances, deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions, offer more than just artistic skill as they serve as powerful tools for enhancing mental health and well-being. This review paper explores the various psychological benefits of classical dance forms of India, highlighting their impact on cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, stress reduction, anxiety alleviation and Life Satisfaction through an extensive search across diverse academic sources with a set of predefined criteria. By integrating rhythmic movement, music, and storytelling, these dance forms promote mindfulness, enhance neuroplasticity, and serve as therapeutic interventions for conditions like anxiety and depression. The study also examines how participation in Indian classical dance fosters a sense of identity, community and emotional resilience. The findings highlight how classical dance can serve as a therapeutic intervention in modern wellness practices, bridging the gap between cultural heritage and contemporary mental health solutions. By using the Systematic Literature Review Approach (SLR), this review paper aims to identify the gaps within the existing literature on Indian classical dance forms and the subsequent psychological wellbeing, thus providing a framework for future research on Indian

performing arts. Future research can further explore its application in therapy, education and rehabilitation programs, positioning Indian classical dance as an innovative approach to mental well-being.

Keywords: *Indian Classical Dances , Stress Control, Mental Wellbeing, Therapy, Relaxation Technique*

1. Introduction

India has recognized 8 dance forms of Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam, Kathakali, Kathak, Manipuri, Odissi and Sattriya as classical dances of India (Ministry of Culture, n.d.) All these dance forms follow the *Natyashastra* as a foundation to it. *Natyashastra* is a treatise on the performing arts of dance, music and drama. This text consists of 36 chapters and is attributed to be authored by the ancient sage Bharatha, dated back to circa 500 BC (Madhusudan, 2018).

When a dancer emotes a specific emotion, the essence of it reaches the audience, resulting in them feeling the experience of that emotion. This is called the rasa theory, according to the *Natyashastra*. The nine such states of emotions are - *Shringara* (romance), *Hasya* (Humour), *Karuna* (compassion), *Rowdra*(fury), *Veera*(valor), *Bhayanaka*(fear), *Bibhatsa*(disgust/repulse), *Adbutha*(wonder), *Shantha* (calmness). *Vyabhichari Bhavas* are transitory or passing emotions felt by the performer in the context of dance and vary from person to person (Balaji, 2024). Hand gestures which are called *mudras* are used to convey emotions and meanings. The songs that are being used as a medium of expression along with the dance, carries meaningful verses that are emoted by the dancer. Movement of the limbs, head, neck, eye and eyebrows are used for such expressions. The *Aharya* involving the costume, makeup and stage decoration is used to amplify the emotions presented during a performance (Madhusudan, 2018).

The Dancing Girl is a bronze statue from the Indus Valley Civilization, discovered in *Mohenjo Daro*. The other early sources for these dance forms can be seen as sculptures in the *Chennakeshava Temple - Madanikas*, *Chidambaram Temple- The 108 Karanas*, the *Konark Temple*, *Sanchi Stupa*, *Khajuraho* , *Ajanta-Ellora Caves* where one can see dancers in various 4 poses, and using *mudras*. The main statue of Lord *Nataraja* at *Chidambaram* signifies a pose from *Ananda Thandava*, a dance of joy (Mohan, 2015).

The aim of this review paper is to establish the relationship between Indian Classical Dance

Forms and its effects on psychological well-being. By analysing the existing techniques in which Indian Classical Dances are being used for therapy and evaluating the effectiveness of the same, this paper aims to provide an analysis of using Indian Classical Dance for therapy. Through the use of the method of Systematic Literature Review, this study targets the existing gaps in literature concerning Indian Classical Dance Forms and their relationship with mental health, thus providing future directions for its use in the field of psychology.

2. Methodology

2.1 Systematic Literature Review Approach (SLR)

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to ensure a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable synthesis of existing research. This technique involves a process that aids in identifying, evaluating and analysing the researches in a structured manner, thus allowing for a detailed understanding of the relationship between Indian Classical Dances and Mental Well-Being

2.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy

1. **Databases** : Taylor & Francis, Science Direct, Journal of Psychosocial Research, International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health, Frontiers, Central European Journal of Sport Sciences and Medicine, SpringerLink, ResearchGate, ProQuest, EBSCOhost and JMIR
2. **Keywords** : "Indian Classical Dances," "resilience," "emotional regulation," "mental health," "mental wellbeing." Boolean operators of AND, OR were used to narrow down searches. The above were the keywords used to refine searches to obtain papers for the review
3. **Timeframe** : Articles and studies from the year 2015 to 2025 were considered for the review
4. **Manual Screening** : Citation Chaining was done by examining the references of articles to uncover more works (Backward Chaining) and by checking for newer papers that have referenced the same paper (Forward Chaining).

2.3 Inclusion Criteria

1. Studies that are published on credible websites and journals
2. Studies published after 2015

3. Papers and studies that target Indian Classical Dances
4. Papers and studies that address psychological well-being

2.4 Exclusion Criteria

1. Articles and papers that take in NRI dancers who practice Indian Classical Dance Forms as participants.
2. Articles and papers that elaborate on Indian Classical Dances as religious rituals only.
3. Studies that encompass a single participant case study.

2.5 Data Extraction and Analysis Process

Initial Screening : Relevant titles and abstracts were assessed before including them for the review. Irrelevant and redundant articles were filtered out, on the basis of the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned above.

Full Text Review : The articles that were selected in the initial review then went through an in-depth full text analysis to obtain data regarding Indian classical dances and its benefits on psychological wellbeing only.

Coding and Categorization : The reviewed data were coded and grouped based on the frequently appearing themes such as -

- a) Indian Classical Dance as Therapy
- b) Indian Classical Dance through the Lens of Positive Psychology
- c) Indian Classical Dance and Cognitive Enhancement
- d) Indian Classical Dance and Emotional Well-Being

Synthesis : The coded data was used to analyse the gaps identified in using dance for therapy and the socio-cultural context behind it, in order to highlight its implications and propose recommendations.

The above process ensures the validity of the reviews, analysis and findings.

3. Review of Literature

Indian Classical Dance as Therapy

36 children with Down Syndrome were divided into two groups, one where they practised Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Kathak and the other where they engaged in neuromuscular training. The findings of this study revealed that children in the classical dance intervention showed

a significant increase in locomotor skills in comparison to the other group, at the end of the 6 week training (Raghupathy et al., 2020).

The dance form Kathak has been utilised for Dance Movement Therapy for its elements of mudras and navarasas and has been found to help in emotional release demonstrated through a 4 week Kathak session conducted by Ria Bhatia with 40 participants (Pai, 2020; Vishwakarma, 2022).

In addition to the above literature on Indian Classical Dances and stress reduction, an article published by Gurusathya in 2020 explains how Indian Classical Dance Forms can reduce stress by regulating the levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, in turn decreasing the risk of Depression and Anxiety (Guruprasad, 2020).

In the year 2024, Kulshreshtha and Chandel studied hypertension in Kathak dancers and compared them to non-dancers. Their investigation revealed that Kathak dancers not only exhibited a lower risk of hypertension but also showed more symmetrical handgrip strength or HGS, indicating that balanced muscular function through regular Kathak practice may contribute to better cardiovascular health (Kulshreshtha & Chandel, 2024).

Furthermore, Kaipy and Gupta in their review paper published in 2025, explain why Indian Classical Dance Forms can be used as therapy, by describing the neurophysiological basis of components of Indian Classical Dance Forms such as Mudras, Araimandi and expression of the Bhavas activates the Cerebellum, the Somatosensory Cortex, the Motor Cortex, the Mirror Neuron System, along with the secretion of serotonin and endorphins that act as mood enhancers, thereby reducing anxiety. This paper also explains how the Abhinaya or the facial expressions trigger the activation of the Parasympathetic Nervous System, thereby enhancing relaxation through reduced heart rate and breathing (Kaipy & Gupta, 2025).

Indian Classical Dance through the Lens of Positive Psychology

In 2017, 176 Odissi dancers and 116 folk dancers of Odisha were taken in, with an aim to explore their emotional maturity, life satisfaction and self-esteem. The results found a positive relationship between emotional maturity and life satisfaction ; and a positive relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction (Behera & Rangaiah, 2017).

A study conducted by Vig and Srivastava (2018) established a significant positive correlation between the flow experienced by the 50 classical dancers and positive self-concept.

These classical dancers were females and reported having higher levels of personal growth, leading to the positive self-concept.

By using Kasulis' Model of Intimacy and Integrity, an article by Maharajh explains how the *rasas* used in Indian classical dance forms harbors oneness of body and mind connection, thus allowing the dancer to express oneself through the dance form as a medium. This intimacy model allows for the dancer to prevent themselves from distancing themselves from the problem. The integrity model explains how dancers see themselves as being outside the problem and the solution, thus helping them to maintain clear boundaries between the self and the challenges. Both these techniques help Indian Classical Dancers in their quest for resilience (Maharajh, 2022).

In a study in 2023, 194 classical dancers were studied for life satisfaction levels. It was seen that male dancers exhibited stronger life satisfaction than the female dancers, though an overall positive correlation between grit, life satisfaction and self-control was observed, prompting how gender roles have an effect on life satisfaction (Sreerenjini et al., 2023).

Indian Classical Dance and Cognitive Enhancement

A research paper published in 2020 explains how participants who practised an Indian Classical Dance form had greater self-awareness than participants who had not. The authors explain how enacting an emotion can lead to reflection of self during the process (Braun et al., 2021).

A study by Chatterjee et al. (2022) took in 42 females from Bharathanatyam, 54 females from Kathak and 45 females as a part of control group to assess the differences in cognitive performances such as Reaction Time, Stroop Color, Trail Making Test and Digit Span Backward tests. The results highlighted the significant difference in the cognitive performances between the groups, with higher performance levels in Bharatanatyam and Kathak dancers (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

An intervention study in 2024 took in 30 participants with mild to moderate Parkinson's Disease and engaged them in Indian Classical Dance or music along with guided meditation for 6 months. The findings of this study proved that this intervention led to the slowing down of Parkinson's Disease, in the 6 months of the intervention (Mehrotra, 2024).

In another study in 2024 found that the levels of mindfulness are significantly higher in Indian classical dancers after an intervention that involved an online mindfulness session, than the non-dancers who were also given the intervention. In addition to this, the dancers also had more

flow experiences during their performances when compared to the non-dancers experience of flow (Pandya, 2024).

Indian Classical Dance and Emotional Well-Being

A paper published in 2019 talks about the teenagers at Natyashala School of Bharatanatyam, Pune. The unstructured interview which was employed to them found that dance had helped them in alleviating their stress levels and helped them to cope with stress better (Gurusathya, 2019).

Similarly, In 2020, 101 caregivers of Parkinson's with caregiver burnout were given either an intervention where they engaged in Indian Classical Dances or a yoga program or a part of a control group. The results showed a significant difference in the effectivity with the groups of dance and yoga showing higher anxiety alleviation than the control group. In the groups that were administered the intervention, the group with classical dance as the activity showed higher relief from anxiety, when compared to the group that engaged in yoga (Hegde et al., 2020).

A study by Joshi (2022), divided Indian Classical Dancers into four groups based on the years of practice they have had, group one being individuals with 0-3 years of practice, second group with 4-7 years of practice, third group with 7-10 years of practice and the last group of classical dancers with over 10 years of practice. By using the Ryff & Keyes' Psychological Well-Being Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Petrides & Furnham's Trait Emotional Intelligence Scale, it was observed that the group with Indian Classical Dancers with an experience of more than 10 years was seen to show the highest scores in self-esteem, trait emotional intelligence and subjective wellbeing, compared to the other three groups.

In a study conducted in 2023, the levels of perceived stress and symptoms of depression were evaluated, with 206 female Kathak dancers and 235 physically active controls. It was seen that the dancers reported significantly less stress levels and depression symptoms than the non-dancers (Kulshreshtha et al., 2023).

In an experimental study in 2023, 103 college students were made to engage in a training in Odissi for 120 minutes every day for 4 consecutive days. After the end of this intervention it was observed that the stress levels of these students had decreased significantly and showed a difference from the initial levels of stress on day 1. The participants also showed a higher Heart Rate Variability (HRV), indicating low stress and a relaxed state (Garg et al., 2023). By recruiting 277 participants - dancers and non-dancers, a study in 2024 found that classical dancers have a

higher emotional sensitivity when compared to non-dancers, with a significant difference between the two groups (Pai, 2024).

Addressing the Gap in Literature

Despite the growing recognition of the psychological benefits of Indian Classical Dance forms, there is a lack in literature that studies Indian Classical Dances, especially in the context of social well-being, emotional regulation, emotional expressivity and cognitive development. Furthermore, there is a lack in literature that addresses the comparison between different classical dances of India.

In a research by Hess et al. (2000), where 29921 participants from 79 countries were taken in, highlighted how their emotional expressivity aligns with the societal stereotypes (Hess et al., 2000). In this context, it is important to address the gender differences in mental well-being in classical dances. Most researchers recruit female dancers as participants, overlooking the gender stereotypes of male dancers in India. In 2021, Dey and Dasgupta highlighted the stigma and stereotypes experienced by male classical dancers in their study, revealing that 60% of the male participants reported facing discrimination and bullying due to their identity as classical dancers.

In the above review of literature, the study by Hegde et al., in 2020 talks about how classical dance intervention proved to be more effective than yoga, with reference to therapy. This highlights the importance of integrating the Classical Dances of India into therapy as they are deeply culture specific to Indians. In addition to this, the research on Classical Dances of India is often combined with other interventions such as music, meditation or yoga. The study on specific mental benefits that are gained from focusing only on the classical dances are lacking.

4. Conclusion

The synthesis of literature finds a positive association between the usage of Indian Classical Dance for alleviation of stress and anxiety, thus enhancing mental health. Despite these promising insights, the evidence base remains limited in scope, with most studies being restricted with respect to studying various aspects of psychological constructs and being small in scale, with respect to the sample size and genders. This review offers a valuable contribution by thematically examining a diverse body of literature spanning across the disciplines of psychology, performing arts and cultural studies. It highlights the therapeutic relevance of Indian classical dance, positioning it not

only as a form of artistic expression but also as a culturally rooted approach to mental health support system.

Recommendations and Implications

The Indian Classical Dance forms that involve using hand gestures, movements of the body, head, neck, eyes and eyebrows with expression of feelings and emotions act as a medium of expression, which acts as catharsis. They can be used in the context of rehabilitation. Therefore, movement therapy for Indians with dance from a relatable context will effectively help in healing.

Tiwari and Mukherjee (2023) conducted a research study by taking in 70 participants and dividing them into two groups - group one consisting of 35 Indian Classical Dance Practitioners and group two consisting of 35 Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) Practitioners. By using the Mental Health Inventory by Jagdish and Srivastava and Sheldon's Perceived Stress Scale, along with open ended interviews, it was noted that there was no significant difference in stress experienced by both the groups, with DMT practitioners benefiting from the dance routine, though the difference was insignificant. The factor that was seen to be influencing this difference was noted to be the increased hours of practicing the dance (DMT), due to the structured functioning of DMT, keeping in mind, mental wellbeing as the goal (Tiwari & Mukherjee, 2023). This shows how Indian Classical Dance can yield significant psychological benefits, if modified into a structured therapy, with a goal to enhance mental wellbeing. There is also a significant scope for policy level interventions to include these dance forms into the curriculums of schools and colleges, while preserving the Indian heritage and at the same time, reaping its benefits.

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