



Across Life Span: Understanding Therapeutic Impact of Music Through The Lens of Ashramas

Shweta G, Undergraduate Student, Department of Psychology and Economics NMKRV
College for Women

shwetaguruprasad9@gmail.com

Abstract: Indian music is a unique fusion of mathematical precision, spirituality, and therapeutic potential, mirroring India's traditional healing systems. Beyond its artistic value, it profoundly influences mental, emotional, and physical well-being. This study explores Indian music's transformative power from two perspectives: the listener and the singer. Using a qualitative methodology, it incorporates a literature review, interactions with music teachers and students, and self-analysis of musical engagement. The findings highlight Indian music's role in enhancing emotional resilience, mental clarity, and overall psychological balance. It highlights the importance of *Sankalp* (resolution) as *Sadhana* (dedicated practice) in unlocking lifelong benefits. Regardless of when one begins, the effects of Indian music extend across all stages of life, reinforcing its timeless relevance. This paper encourages students, practitioners, teachers, and parents to integrate Indian music into daily life as a powerful medium for holistic well-being and personal growth.

Keywords: *Indian Music, Therapy, Well-Being, Emotional Resilience, Mental Clarity, Lifelong Benefits*

1. Introduction

Indian music is far more than a source of entertainment; it is sacred, profound, and vibrationally potent, like the symbol *Om*. Its influence resonates deeply across all stages of life: it soothes the curious mind of a child, offers reflection and connection to the adult, and becomes a powerful emotional probe for the elderly, often unlocking forgotten memories or reawakening

symbolic moments from the past. Music, particularly Indian classical music, is not simply heard, it is experienced. It has the ability to stimulate the intellect, awaken dormant emotions, and heal psychological distress. Through this paper, we seek to explore the intricate layers of Indian music, especially *Carnatic* music, and its relationship with human emotion, cognition, memory, and therapeutic potential. A single melody, when played to different individuals, can evoke varied emotional responses *bhavam* and trigger unique recollections. Some may relive a joyful time, while others may revisit sorrow or healing. This phenomenon is not coincidental; it is rooted in the structure, emotion, and vibrational character of the music itself. Carnatic music, the classical music of South India, is a highly structured, ancient system of musical knowledge that has evolved over centuries. It is as intellectually rigorous as it is emotionally rich.

The pedagogy of Carnatic music begins with foundational elements such as *swaras* (musical notes), *alankarams* (patterns of swaras), and *geethams* (simple compositions). These initial lessons train the voice, instill discipline, and introduce the student to the emotive and mathematical components of the system. The next level of learning involves *varnams*, which serve as both practice pieces and performance standards. They combine both melody and rhythm and help strengthen the foundation of both *raga* (melodic mode) and *tala* (rhythmic cycle). As students' progress, they engage with more complex musical forms like *kritis*, *ragam-tanam-pallavi*, and *manodharma sangeetham* (improvisation), which allow performers to explore their creativity within the structured framework. Central to Carnatic music is the concept of *raga*, a melodic framework that conveys a specific emotional essence or *rasa*. There are 72 fundamental *melakarta ragas*, which serve as parent scales, from which thousands of derived ragas emerge. Each raga carries with it a unique emotional flavor. For example, *Raga Shivarangini*, which, recently studied, evokes *karuna rasa* the sentiment of compassion, longing, or supplication, often used to invoke divine grace and forgiveness. These ragas are not arbitrary combinations of notes; they are powerful emotional codes embedded with cultural memory and spiritual significance. Another essential component of Carnatic music is *gamakas* the oscillations and embellishments that give life to each note, adding depth and emotion much like ornamentation on a deity in a temple. These musical nuances enhance the expressiveness of compositions and, in many ways, mirror the intricacies of human emotion and the layering of life's experiences.

The *tala* system in Carnatic music is equally complex and crucial. *Tala* refers to the rhythmic cycles or time measures, and each composition adheres to a specific *tala*. There are hundreds of talas, though a handful like *Adi*, *Rupaka*, and *Khanda Chapu* are most commonly used. Talas are essential in maintaining structure and pace, and mastering them improves

cognitive synchronization, memory retention, and coordination skills (*Sharma, 2015*).

Music has a profound effect on the brain. Studies in neuroscience, Pandya (2021). have shown that listening to music activates multiple areas of the brain associated with emotion, memory, and even motor control. The limbic system, which processes emotions, and the hippocampus, involved in memory formation, are both stimulated by music, Pandya, A. (2021)..This explains why a familiar raga or melody can instantly transport someone back in time, evoking memories and associated emotions. Carnatic music, with its intricate structures and emotive ragas, offers a unique stimulus for the brain. The use of improvisation (*manodharma*) challenges the musician to think creatively and make real-time decisions. This enhances cognitive flexibility, a trait important for problem-solving and adaptability in daily life.

Furthermore, the mathematical precision required to master talas and rhythmic improvisations (*kanakku*) strengthens analytical thinking and mental agility. The emotional component of Carnatic music is equally significant. Each raga, as mentioned, conveys a specific *rasa*, or sentiment. The performer, through voice modulation, lyrical expression, and musical ornamentation, brings out the essence of the raga. For the listener, this can be a deeply therapeutic experience. Listening to *Raga Mohanam* may induce joy and peace, while *Raga Bhairavi* might evoke pathos and humility.

Music therapy is a growing field across the world, but in India, it is still emerging as a formal discipline. Historically, however, India has long recognized the healing potential of sound and music. In Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, the concept of *nada* (**sound**) is considered crucial for maintaining mental and spiritual well-being. Sound vibrations were believed to influence the *doshas* (bodily humors) and maintain balance. Several Indian musicians have explored the therapeutic dimensions of music. Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna was a pioneer in introducing unconventional ragas and experimenting with music as a healing tool. His ability to innovate within the Carnatic framework made him an icon in both artistic and therapeutic circles. Similarly, violin maestro Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan. He believed in the vibrational power of music to harmonize the body's energy fields and promote healing. Music therapy in India has potential applications across various domains from education and geriatric care to mental health and rehabilitation. For children with developmental delays or learning difficulties, music can improve attention span, language skills, and emotional expression. In adults, music therapy has shown benefits in reducing anxiety, enhancing mood, and managing stress. For the elderly, particularly those with dementia or Alzheimer's, familiar melodies can

help recover lost memories and foster communication. As a student of Carnatic music, I have personally experienced the transformative power of music. There have been days when singing a particular raga has altered my emotional state entirely bringing calm on anxious days, or evoking gratitude and humility in moments of pride.

When we sing *Shivarangini*, I often feel a connection to something greater than myself, a sense of surrender and peace that words alone cannot achieve. I have also observed the effects of music on others. Playing the same composition for different individuals often results in strikingly different emotional responses. A child might feel joy and curiosity, an adult may feel nostalgia, while an elderly listener might be moved. This range of responses illustrates music's capacity to speak to the subconscious and the soul, bypassing intellectual defenses and reaching straight into the emotional core. Indian classical music, and Carnatic music in particular, is a treasure trove of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual wealth. Its meticulously designed structure not only makes it a sophisticated art form but also a powerful tool for healing and cognitive development. As we move toward a more integrated understanding of health and wellness, it is crucial to recognize and harness the therapeutic potential of indigenous knowledge systems like Carnatic music.

Indian music has to be popularised for its legacy to continue, and the legacy has been challenged by the impact of colonisation, westernisation and its lack of popularity among children in schools who are influenced by the social media, pressured to pursue more western interests and art. Music must be included in the educational curriculum and school teaching as a means to help children relax, ease academic pressure, and reduce their dependence on dopamine-driven stimulation, thereby soothing their nerves and calming their minds. The promotion of music therapy, which draws on the power of music in a therapeutic relationship to manage a range of conditions and improve your quality of life. A music therapist tailors sessions to your needs. You may sing or play instruments, listen to music or discuss the meaning of lyrics. You don't need musical skills, and people of all ages can benefit, and the study of its applications in the Indian context should be encouraged across disciplines. Integrating Carnatic music into educational curricula, mental health practices, and wellness programs could lead to the development of emotionally intelligent, spiritually aware, and cognitively agile individuals. More research, collaboration, and awareness are needed to pass on this invaluable knowledge to future generations not merely as tradition, but as a living, healing force for modern life.

2. Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative, exploratory, as a music learner, supported by informal interviews with musicians, teachers, and students. Insights were drawn from personal learning experiences under the guidance of my teacher, Dr. Jayanthi, and documented in my music notes. Primary data was collected through conversations and observations within the music community, while secondary sources included scholarly articles, newspaper features, and online resources. Together, these sources

provided a holistic understanding of how Indian classical music supports emotional, cognitive, and spiritual development across life stages.

3. Discussion

Garbhasamskara through Music Therapy

Garbha Samskara is an ancient Ayurvedic practice that emphasizes the physical, psychological, and spiritual development of a child during pregnancy (Wisdom Library, Sharma, 2015). Rooted in holistic well-being, it begins with the mindful selection of a partner and extends through various rituals, diet, meditation, and auditory stimulation designed to nurture the fetus. This concept highlights the belief that a child's impressions begin not at birth, but in the womb. Pregnancy, while a profoundly transformative journey, can also be a lonely and emotionally demanding period for many mothers. In such times, music often serves as a companion and a source of solace.

Across generations, mothers have instinctively turned to singing lullabies, chanting mantras, or listening to devotional music to soothe themselves and their unborn child. From a scientific standpoint, research has shown that the fetal auditory system begins to develop around the third week of gestation and becomes functionally active by the sixth month. By this time, the fetus can recognize and differentiate between different types of sounds and musical tones, which can influence their emotional and neurological development. Indian classical music, with its calming melodies and structured ragas, offers a gentle introduction to the world of sound, helping to initiate a bond between the mother and the unborn baby.

This connection is echoed in Indian mythology through the story of Abhimanyu from the *Mahabharata*. Abhimanyu, while still in his mother Subhadra's womb, overheard Lord Krishna explaining the strategy to break into the Chakravyuha, a complex military formation. Although his mother fell asleep before Krishna could explain how to exit it, Abhimanyu absorbed what he heard and later used this knowledge on the battlefield. This narrative is

symbolic of the deep cognitive and sensory abilities of the fetus and reinforces the ancient belief that prenatal experiences shape postnatal behaviour and intellect. In contemporary times, this idea is mirrored in studies of prenatal learning, Vani and Laxmi (2023), where consistent exposure to calming auditory stimuli, such as soft music, has been associated with better sleep patterns, emotional regulation, and cognitive engagement in infants.

Therefore, sound therapy during pregnancy especially through Indian music can be a meaningful intervention to foster early brain development, reduce maternal stress, and promote emotional bonding, Vani and Lakshmi (2023). Integrating *Garbha Samskara* practices with modern scientific understanding offers a powerful paradigm that bridges tradition and contemporary prenatal care, affirming that the nurturing of life begins not at birth, but in the sacred resonance of the womb.

The Importance of Musical Training During the Brahmacharya Stage The *Brahmacharya* stage, which spans from birth to 25 years of age, is considered a foundational phase in an individual's life. This period is marked by intense learning, personality development, and the cultivation of discipline. Introducing music education during this phase plays a vital role in shaping multiple dimensions of a child's growth.

Cognitive and Language Development

Learning music, particularly Carnatic music, during *Brahmacharya* stage significantly aids in language and speech development. Carnatic compositions span multiple languages such as Kannada, Telugu, Sanskrit, and Tamil enabling children to naturally grasp pronunciation and phonetics across different linguistic systems. Remarkably, children often sing these compositions with fluency even without formally learning the language, which fosters linguistic versatility and auditory sensitivity (Vani & Lakshmi, 2023).

Neurological Benefits

Recent evidence suggests, Raghavan, Menon & Rao, (2022), that long-term musical training enhances the plasticity of cortical and subcortical neurons, thereby strengthening auditory processing mechanisms. These neurological adaptations contribute to improved listening skills, memory, and cognitive flexibility, which are essential in both academic and everyday contexts.

Social and Personality Development

Group singing activities nurture social skills and create a strong sense of community. Participating in collective musical experiences offers catharsis, relieves stress, and fosters a non-judgmental and safe environment. Such settings boost confidence and emotional intelligence,

which are critical for building healthy interpersonal relationships, (Vani Lakshmi, 2023).

Discipline and Character Formation

Brahmacharya is fundamentally characterized by discipline *Sadhana* which music inherently instills through consistent practice and dedication. Developing self-discipline early in life enhances decision-making capabilities and supports the emergence of a *satvik* (pure and mindful) personality. This temperament encourages individuals to be conscious of their actions and words. Musicians, especially singers, are often noted for their humility and pursuit of higher knowledge, reflecting the deeper values cultivated through musical practice.

The Role of Technology and Popular Culture in Modern Music Learning

In the modern era, music learning and listening have undergone a significant transformation due to the rise of online platforms. Tools such as Google Meet, Zoom, and specialized music learning software have made music education more accessible than ever before. Even traditional *tanpura* classes are now available online, allowing students from across the globe to connect directly with teachers. While not identical to the traditional *gurukula* system, this model has reintroduced personalized, one-on-one attention, reflecting the essence of the ancient teacher-student bond.

Furthermore, music streaming platforms like Spotify have played a pivotal role in shaping youth engagement with Indian music, 45% of young Indian listeners regularly use such platforms. Many report feeling a stronger connection to their cultural roots through this engagement. Prominent pop culture icons like Shreya Ghoshal and A.R. Rahman often incorporate elements of traditional Indian music into their compositions, which are then featured in commercially successful films. With Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms creating new and innovative content, shows like *Bandish Bandits*, explore the journey of a classical musician with a legacy in Hindustani music, singers break the stereotype of Indian music and explore the youthful and evergreen nature of Indian music. These musical influences, widely embraced by the youth, have fostered a renewed appreciation for Indian classical styles while also providing a platform for cultural expression and social connectivity among peers.

Indian Music as a Tool for Managing Exam Stress

During important examinations, We have found ourselves turning to instrumental and light Indian music to calm my nerves and stay focused. This experience is not unique many students report using music as a coping mechanism during periods of academic stress. Research supports this behaviour as well. Medical undergraduate students and found that listening to music positively influenced concentration and academic outcomes. The study concluded that

background music (Ravichandran & Nithya, 2016), especially instrumental and non-lyrical forms, can help reduce anxiety, improve mood, and enhance cognitive functioning. Indian classical and instrumental music, with its soothing rhythms and emotive tones, is particularly effective in creating a calm and focused mental state, making it a valuable tool for students navigating the pressures of academic life.

Importance of music in Gruhastha and Vanaprastha stages of life.

Music, Devotion, and the Timeless Opportunity for Sadhana

There is no age limit to learning music, especially in the context of Carnatic music, where the syllabus is thoughtfully designed to be inclusive and accessible. Great composers like Purandara Dasa, the father of Carnatic music crafted foundational lessons that emphasize comfort and gradual progression, making the art form approachable for learners at any stage of life. For adults navigating the responsibilities of middle age marked by time constraints, familial obligations, and societal expectations, music becomes more than a hobby; it becomes a refuge. Just as spirituality offers a path to inner liberation, music too can serve as a deeply transformative and devotional practice. Within the framework of ***Sadhana-Bhakti***, devotion can manifest in two primary forms: ***vaidhi-bhakti***, which is driven by scriptural injunctions, and ***raganuga-bhakti***, which arises from spontaneous love and attachment.(Jiva Institute). In ***vaidhi-bhakti***, the devotee may not yet feel natural affection but engages in devotional acts out of sincere discipline. Rupa Gosvami(Jiva Institute), outlines sixty-four ***angas*** (limbs) of ***vaidhi-bhakti***, among which five are particularly powerful: associating with saintly people, singing the Lord's name, listening to the ***Srimad-Bhagavatam***, residing in Mathura, and serving the deity with reverence. These practices engage the body, mind, and senses in divine service and are said to lead to ***bhava-bhakti*** a deeper emotional connection with the divine.(Jiva Institute). Music, especially when intertwined with such devotional acts, offers a profound way to incorporate spirituality into daily life. Whether through singing bhajans, listening to classical ragas, or simply chanting in solitude, music becomes a vehicle for connection, expression, and elevation. Regardless of age, time constraints, or musical ability.

Integrating Music into Corporate Life for Creativity and Well-being

Modern corporate culture, while fast-paced and achievement-driven, often leads to high stress levels, reduced creativity, and limited time for self-reflection. According to a ***Harvard Business Review*** article, Amabile (1998) creativity is not solely a product of expertise or talent; motivation plays a critical role in determining whether an individual will apply their creative potential. Even the most capable professional may fail to innovate or problem-solve effectively

without the intrinsic drive to engage with their work. Indian classical music, in particular, aligns naturally with daily rhythms, offering specific *ragas* suited to different times of the day morning *ragas* to energize, and evening *ragas* to soothe and unwind. Even short, repetitive compositions like *bhajans* or *abhangs* are easy to learn and can be deeply meditative. These practices require minimal time investment but can significantly enhance emotional well-being, reduce stress, and stimulate a sense of purpose. By integrating music as a mindful habit, professionals can foster both personal enrichment and creative rejuvenation, making music not just a hobby, but a meaningful and sustaining element of work-life balance.

Breathwork, Music, and the Healing Symphony of Life

Most of us default to shallow breathing, which over time weakens our lungs and reduces our resilience as a species. This interplay between breath and music revealed how deeply connected the two are. In fact, research, Bernardi, Porta and Sleight (2006), supports this connection: our breathing patterns adapt to the tempo and nature of the music we hear, and this, in turn, impacts our heart rate. Faster, heavier music can elevate the heart rate, while slower tempo music tends to slow it down, promoting relaxation. One study even found that individuals with slower resting heart rates tend to live longer, and that music can influence the hypothalamus, a key regulator of emotional and physical well-being

This mind-body harmony has been systematized in ancient Indian wisdom through *Raga Chikitsa* or *Raga Vidya*, the therapeutic application of specific ragas to heal and balance the body and mind, Sairam (2004). *Ragachikitsa* Though not commonly used in mainstream practice today, many Indian classical musicians and scholars have deeply explored and applied this form of music therapy. In my own music practice, we begin each session with a 15-minute routine of pranayama and breathing exercises. This not only helps prepare us for singing multiple compositions but also strengthens the *swaras*, allowing for better voice control and range. As the saying goes, “Breathing is singing,” and mastering the art of breath is foundational for any vocalist. Correct breathing empowers a singer with the ability to sustain longer notes, maintain pitch, and explore a broader vocal spectrum. A straight posture, breath awareness, and mindful warm-up are essential parts of this process.

Ageing with Music

Music also has profound implications for aging. Contrary to the stereotype of aging as a lonely, diminishing journey, music offers connection, vitality, and joy. Institutions like the Raga Research Centre in Chennai and the teachings of Saivite saints like Gnanasambandar and Manikkavachakar (7th century) highlight music's historical role in healing. Legendary Carnatic

musician Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna was among the pioneers who formalized the concept of “music therapy” rooted in raga science. Recent neuroscientific research has further validated this ancient wisdom. Raghavan, Menon and Rao (2022), a study revealed that lifelong Carnatic musicians exhibit enhanced encoding of auditory signals, speech perception, and cortical plasticity through dopaminergic reward systems. These effects contribute to improved mood, memory, and overall quality of life. Musicians in the study also demonstrated better visuospatial skills, language processing, executive function, and working memory (Raghavan et al., 2022). This is attributed to the way Carnatic music activates multiple limbic pathways and cortical networks, enhancing brain function holistically.

Case Study

Interview with Vandana Somashekar : Vandana Somashekhar started learning music at the age of 40. She originally wanted to send her daughter to music class because she had a good voice, but she was worried her daughter might not pay attention. So, Vandana decided to join her in the class. Over time, she realized it was a great chance for her to follow her own childhood dream of learning music—something she couldn’t do earlier because the classes were too far away. She and her daughter even took the beginner’s music exam together and passed. Vandana says she loves singing in groups and recently sang bhajans during the Ram Navami festival, which made her very happy. She doesn’t usually sing solo but enjoys humming songs at home every day. She encourages other middle-aged people to try learning music too. She believes it helps keep the brain active, can prevent problems like Alzheimer’s, and gives a chance to fulfil long-held dreams. Her message is simple: it’s never too late to learn something new and keep yourself mentally healthy.

Ageing and Community Building Through Music

Music serves as a powerful medium for community building and social connection, especially in the later stages of life. In a music classroom, age becomes irrelevant as students from different generations come together to learn the same compositions, share a common goal, and experience the joy of collective growth. This kind of inclusive environment fosters optimism and a sense of belonging, where people are united not by age but by a shared passion. For many in their middle or later years, especially those experiencing solitude or *empty nest syndrome*, a common emotional state marked by feelings of loss and sadness after children leave home, music offers a healing path forward. This transition can be particularly disorienting for women in traditional Indian households, where identity and routine often revolve around caregiving roles. When those responsibilities fade, it can feel like a loss of purpose. Engaging with music, either

by learning or teaching, provides an opportunity to reestablish meaning and activate social interaction.

More than just classical singing, music offers diverse modalities for expression and healing dance and movement therapy, group singing circles, songwriting, and even composition can serve as forms of emotional release and creative exploration. For many, this becomes a gateway to reconnect with their *inner child* and revisit the creative dreams that may have been set aside during the responsibilities of adult life. In this sense, music is not just an artistic pursuit, but also a tool for reclaiming joy, building new relationships, and rediscovering oneself at any age, (Sairam, 2004), *Ragachikitsa*.

4. Conclusion

This paper explored the intersection of Indian classical music, particularly Carnatic music and human development across the various stages of life, using the lens of the ancient Indian ashrama system. Drawing from a combination of classical doctrines, scientific research, and personal experiences as a music student, this work motivates individuals of all ages to explore Indian music as a means of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual enrichment.

Beginning with prenatal care, the paper discussed the impact of music on fetal development, emphasizing the role of sound and vibration in early neural wiring. Moving into the stage of *Brahmacharya*, or childhood and youth, music was shown to be critical for personality formation, language development, and social bonding. The values of *sadhana* (practice) and *sankalpa* (intention) were highlighted as essential traits cultivated through disciplined music learning, which lays the foundation for cognitive control, focus, and emotional regulation.

In adulthood and middle age often marked by stress, responsibility, and time constraints, the relevance of music was examined from both psychological and social dimensions. Despite modern challenges such as demanding corporate culture and digital distractions, music remains a viable outlet for creativity, emotional expression, and community engagement. Studies referenced throughout the paper (e.g., Amabile, 1998, Harvard Business Review; Research Journal of Pharmaceutical Biological and Chemical Sciences, 2016) support the positive impact of music on motivation, academic performance, and mental well-being.

In an era dominated by speed, information overload, and growing isolation, Indian classical music offers a grounding anchor an opportunity to pause, reflect, and reconnect with one's inner self. Whether through the disciplined journey of learning an instrument or the simple

joy of singing a devotional song, music enables individuals to reclaim agency over their time, emotions, and purpose. the accessibility of music today across age, background, and technological platforms makes it an inclusive and transformative path. It is not just an art; it is a medium of healing, expression, and a lifelong companion in the pursuit of wholeness.

Furthermore, the paper delved into the therapeutic benefits of music in later stages of life. Through practices like *raga chikitsa* (musical therapy using specific ragas), breathwork, and pre-singing pranayama, individuals can achieve physical relaxation and mental clarity. Scientific studies (e.g., Music and the Aging Brain, 2021) indicate that long-term Carnatic music training enhances cortical plasticity, cognitive functions, and emotional stability in aging populations. Music thus emerges not only as an art form but also as a holistic approach to aging gracefully, promoting both longevity and vitality.

Finally, this paper advocates for music as a tool for combating loneliness, especially in individuals experiencing *empty nest syndrome* or major life transitions. In communal learning environments, where students of various ages come together with a shared purpose, music fosters empathy, social cohesion, and intergenerational bonding. The act of singing, teaching, or simply listening becomes a mode of healing, reconnection, and self-discovery.

In summary, this work is to embrace Indian music not merely as a cultural practice or academic subject, but as a living, breathing force that nurtures the body, mind, and soul across the entire human lifespan.

Note: This research paper is also informed by the author's personal experiences as a Carnatic music student, insights from her music teacher Jayanthi Madam, her own music notes, and a range of supplemental materials including online articles and resources accessed via Google.

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