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The Therapeutic Value of Indian Classical, Folk and Innovative Dance Forms

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Abstract

Dance provides an active, non-competitive form of exercise that has potential positive effects for physical health as well as mental and emotional wellbeing. Dance therapy is based on the idea that body and mind are co-relational. The therapeutic approaches with various forms of Indian dances are a new entrant to dance literature. Ayurveda held dance as a power of healing (therapy) and inner awareness (psychology). Indian philosophy also supports the facts of *Sangeet* (song, dance and music) for benefit of human health physically as well as mentally. The powerful dance form of Bhangra (Punjab), Karagam (Tamilnadu), Chou, Rayabese, Dhali (West Bengal) gives good health and strength. The fast footwork of Kathak dance helps to release anger and tension. Manipuri dancers make rounded movements and avoid any jerks, sharp edges or straight lines. It gives them undulating and soft appearance, proper body control and peace of mind. All these body movements, body balancing, expression, muscle movement, muscle constriction and relaxation have a strong effect on therapeutic movements. In India today the dance therapists are conscious about this matter and in therapeutic sessions they actually improvise different dance movements according to the need.

[**Keywords:** Dance therapy, folk dance, classical dance, innovative dance.]

Introduction

Dance provides an active, non-competitive form of exercise that has potential positive effects for physical health as well as mental and emotional wellbeing (Chatterjee, 2013a). It has the potential to motivate and excite people and it can be a way of engaging people in physical activity (Clippenger, 1997). Scientific research proved that in males and females dance practice and physical activity can have a positive effect on physical fitness and it also increases lung function, lung capacity, flexibility and aerobic capacity (Blair, Cheng & Holder, 2001). As a physical activity and a creative art form, it is believed that dance can make a significant contribution to the healthy-living agenda (Marshall, Sarkin, Sallis & McKenzie, 1998). Now-a-days in many hospitals and medical settings it has been used as a form of therapy not only for mental health, but also for physical health as well. Dance therapy as exercise is known to increase the neurotransmitters called endorphins which increase a state of well-being. Dance increases total body movement, which helps to improve circulatory, respiratory, skeletal, and muscular systems (Quin, Redding & Frazer, 2007).

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The therapeutic approaches with various forms of dances are a new entrant to dance literature (Chatterjee, 2013b). A great deal of research is in progress in different parts of the world regarding this new approach, but such types of theoretical background and/or practical implementation are limited in our country and thus necessitate in-depth research on the topic. The different body movements and the effects of different folk, classical and innovative dance forms are discussed in this present study with the basic aim to understand their therapeutic effects. For this purpose an interview and survey based demographic study was done, using different questionnaires and medical checkup facilities, with at least hundred dancers of each dance forms to have a conclusive statement. Moreover health related discussion, and therapeutic implementation of dance forms particularly in Indian context has never been discussed in earlier reports and thus in this study it is a unique approach to contribution.

Dance Therapy: Indian Perspective

Dance therapy is specialized and psychotherapeutic use of dance for the improvement of cognitive, behavioral and physical conditions. Dance therapy is based on the idea that body and mind are co-relational, that the physical state of the body can affect the emotional and mental wellbeing both positively and negatively (Quin, Redding & Frazer, 2007). In western world dance has been used for long time as therapy for patients, whether alternate or complementary.

The relationship of health with various types of dances is of great interest now-a-days. Indeed, the approach of therapy is maintained in India knowingly or unknowingly from a very long time. Ayurveda held dance as a power of healing (therapy) and inner awareness (psychology). Indian philosophy also supports the facts of *Sangeet* (song, dance and music) for benefit of human health physically as well as mentally (Shastri, 1931). The *Natyashastra*, a millennium old Indian treatise, seems to be the first in recognizing the two-fold importance of psychology in connection with the production of a *natya* (drama), comprising of *geet* (song), *badya* (music) and *nritya* (dance). According to the *Natyashastra*, among the four techniques of representation (*abhinaya*), such as gestures (*angika*), words (*vacika*), make-up (*aharya*) and the *sattva* (*sattvika*), the *angika* consists of physical representation by using various gestures and postures (Ghosh, 1967). The eyes have different kinds of glances depending upon the expressions of psychological states (*bhava*) and sentiments (*rasa*). Eyeballs are also liable to similar changes to create impressions of different feelings and emotions, and so are eyebrows, nose, cheek, chin, neck, head, limbs, etc. It also holds different body (torso) movements, hand gestures, movement of different body parts in its actual directions and their effects on dance as well as human body and mind (Shastri, 1931). In modern India such types of works are in a very nascent stage. Some organizations and Institutes are being involved to do some work for betterment of life by dance therapy.

Therapeutic Value of Indian Classical Dances

Indian Classical Dances and their ancient history indicate that from the very beginnings these dances are aimed at the betterment of health of dancers. In many cases they are compared with *yogis* as a form of physical and mental exercise. Indian classical dance styles are categorized into major seven kinds: *Kathak*, *Bharatnatyam*, *Manipuri*, *Kathakali*, *Odissi*, *Kuchipudi* and *Mohiniattam*. All Indian classical dances are to varying degrees rooted in the *Natyashastra* and therefore share common features: for example, the *mudras*, some body positions, and the inclusion of dramatic or expressive acting or *abhinaya*. The Indian classical music tradition provides the accompaniment for the dance, and as percussion is such an integral part of the tradition. The dancers of nearly all the styles wear bells around their ankles to complement the percussion (Dutt, 2008).

Indian classical dances are dances of the mind and soul and are extremely traditional. This dance is a form of communication that brings out the innermost feelings and at the same time depicts the cultural aspects of a civilization (Sudhakar, 1994). They present a spectacular and gorgeous aspect of the magnificent and continuous Indian dance tradition. Beyond entertainment the aim of all art is to realize reality and experience liberation and growth of righteousness as man, through beauty and delight. This also makes Indian dances impersonal and traditional (Sudhakar, 1994).

A very little knowledge was available till date regarding the therapeutic value of Indian classical dances. The development and evolution of Indian dance is intrinsically connected to Indian philosophy and spirituality. Indeed, the approach of therapy in this type of dance is also maintained knowingly or unknowingly from a very long time. It is clearly understandable that prolonged practice of dance in its proper way not only gives physical fitness but also strengthens the mental power, self-esteem and helps to relate the body-mind relationship.

Kathak is a classical dance form originated from North India. It is a partially narrative dance form characterized by fast footwork (*tatkar*), spins (*chakkar*) and innovative use of *bhav* (expression) in *abhinaya* (acting). With time and history, it has developed into a highly refined system of rhythm and movement, capable of communicating complex human dynamics as well as abstract form and composition (Dutt, 2008). The *hastamudras* (hand gestures), the poses, and even the walk of the dancer further filter into this narrative and the whole feeling conveyed by the dancer. In light of dance therapy Kathak is a complete dynamic theatre. The dancer depends on their *ghungroos* (dancing bells) for balancing in *chakkars* (spins), facial muscle for *abhinaya* (expression), proper position of arms and feet and also *mudras*, etc. Kathak is a stimulus that affects the body in its entirety. The fast footwork helps to release anger and tension. The *thaat* performed in this dance form includes the therapeutic torso movements and it is now used for the treatment purpose also as a form of physical exercise. Kathak signifies the importance of dance and is the revolutionary new way to communicate.

Bharatnatyam is one of the most sublime of the Indian classical dances. It emerged in Tanjore of Tamil Nadu. Bharatnatyam encompasses all the traditional aspects of classical dance: the *mudras* (hand positions), *abhinaya* (facial expressions), and *padams* (narrative dances). In Bharatnatyam dance form the dancers make considerable use of hand-and-eye movements to express different emotions (Kilger, 1993). It is an amalgamation of emotion, music, rhythm and expression. Bharatanatyam is *mudra* oriented and gives importance to *padartha abhinaya*, each word interpreted through mudras. In *navarasa* parts (nine sentiments) the dancers express their inner feelings and it helps to release their emotions. This practice can be well used for emotional wellbeing and psycho-therapy. This dance form strengthens the hamstring muscles including semitendinosus, semimembranosus, biceps femoris, etc.

Manipuri dance originates from Manipur, a state in north-eastern part of India. It was originally only performed in temples and continues to form an integral part of the religious and social fabric of Manipur. Manipuri dance is devotional in nature and is exclusively attached to the Hindu deities Radha and Krishna, who are often the main characters depicted in dance compositions like *Raslila*. It became better known outside the region through the efforts of Rabindranath Tagore. Movements of the body, feet and facial expressions in Manipuri dance are significant. Unlike other classical dances the Manipuri dancers never strike the ground hard during dancing. This saves them not to be injured during long practice of dance. The traditional Manipuri dance style embodies delicate, lyrical and graceful movements. Behind this outwardly soft impression a tough regime of body control is always present in this form of dance (Kashyap, 2005). Manipuri dancers make rounded movements and avoid any jerks, sharp edges or straight lines. It gives them undulating and soft appearance, proper body control and peace of mind.

Kathakali is a form of Indian classical dance originated in the Southern Indian state of Kerala. Kathakali is considered to be a combination of five elements of fine art: expressions (*natya*, the component with emphasis on facial expressions), dance (*nritta*, the component of dance with emphasis on rhythm and movement of hands, legs and body), enactment (*nrittya*, the element of drama with emphasis on *mudras*, the hand gestures), song or vocal accompaniment (*geet*), instrument accompaniment (*badya*). Kathakali dance style depends on the component with emphasis on facial expressions, rhythm and movement of hands, legs, body and the hand gestures. The therapeutic part of this dance forms mainly deals with the facial muscle. This dance form needs much more strength and mainly the male dancers perform the act. According to the philosophy of Kathakali, the human body is divided into a number of minute anatomical units, which can either function individually or together in combinations. Kathakali dancers make geometric patterns which are either squares or rectangles and this is how they cover space. This dance form includes jumps, sweeps and leaps. The torso is used mostly as one entire unit although sometimes it is treated as two or three different units. With leg extensions the dancers shift their weight from one foot to another. During these movements they also perform elaborate facial gestures at the same time. Unlike the other classical dances, Kathakali places emphasis on muscles. The movement of the facial

muscles, like the eye-brows, the eye-balls and the lower eyelids, form an important part of a dancer's training.

Odissi dance form is the temple dance tradition from Orissa state of India. Odissi dance is composed of a rich variety of *bhangi* (the basic poses or movements of *nritta*) found mostly in the Hindu sculptures. This dance style mainly follows the *tribhangi* (three dimensional body gesture). The movement of the hips is a unique feature in Odissi while such movements are prohibited in the other dance forms. One of the typical poses in Odissi is the *natavara bhangi* or *tribhanga*. In Odissi this is achieved by sharply deflecting the hips in one direction, deflecting the torso in another and finally deflecting the head in the same direction as the hip. In this dance human body is divided into two halves with equal distribution of weight. Odissi repertoire consists of 36 types of *padaved* (leg movement), seven types of *bhramari* (spins), and different types of expression. This dance form includes various forms of sitting, walking, leaping and elevations that reinforce some of the basic therapeutic movements of the dance. Prolonged practice of this dance forms give a very good body shape, with thin waist and tender look, to female dancers. During the present study it was noted that the Odissi dancers have great lung function, and muscular control of waist, hip and thigh.

Kuchipudi is an Indian classical dance form originated from Andhra Pradesh, a state of South India. The dance form attained perfection by the time of Golconda king Abdul Hassan Tanesha (Dutt, 2008). The movements in Kuchipudi are quicksilver and scintillating, rounded and fleet-footed. Kuchipudi dance is *vachika abhinaya* (based on dialogues) oriented. It also highlights the therapeutics as was followed in *Natyashastra* more than any other dance form in India. Each aspect of *abhinaya* or the expressive means is given a detailed description in this dance. This dance requires proper body balance. The therapeutic effects of this dance form are embedded in its grace and fluid movements. The survey conducted with the dancers showed strong effect of some muscles including rectus abdominis, abdominal external oblique, latissimus dorsi, gluteus maximus, etc.

Mohiniattam is another traditional South Indian dance form originated from Kerala. It is a very graceful dance form. Generally this dance form is performed by women dancer as a solo recital. The word Mohiniattam literally means *dance of the enchantress*. There are approximately 40 different basic movements, known as *atavukal* in Mohiniattam. The dance involves the swaying of broad hips and the gentle movements of erect torso from side to side (Dutt, 2008; Sudhakar, 1994). The dancers show a good strength and control over different muscles like adductor muscles, quadriceps femoris, soleus, tibialis posterior, peroneus longus and so on. All these body movements, body balancing, expression, muscle movement, muscle constriction and relaxation have a strong effect on therapeutic movements.

Therapeutic Value of Indian Folk Dances

Indian culture includes a treasure of a variety of folk dances. The diversity in culture and tradition is reflected in the variety of Indian folk dances too. Basically folk dances are much more related to Indian history (Dutt, 2008). They are preferred by ordinary people in every festive moods and it brings all participants in a complete forum. As many of these dances are generally group dance form, it also helps the dancers to feel togetherness and it in time reflects the unity among the diverse kind of people of India (Chatterjee, 2013a). This is the basic beauty of such folk dances. Indian folk dance is diverse because of India's vast cultural diversity. It has many forms including *bhangra*, *lavani*, *dandiya* etc. Different folk dances of India reflect the heart of Indian peoples and their culture. These dance forms are rural in origin. Thus they are full of original scent of Indian soil. Generally folk dances are accompanied by folk music, song and instruments. Most of the folk music of India is dance-oriented.

Many folk dances are performed by ordinary people rather than professional dancers. It is very usual that on special occasions, the villagers will gather and sing and dance, accompanying themselves on a variety of folk instruments. Such special occasions include harvesting, planting, marriages and religious holidays. Sometimes the folk dances are performed by professionals. There is the institution of the folk theatre. Professional musicians, actors and dancers travel from village to village performing their dance dramas. This seems to be a rural extension of the ancient theatrical tradition found in the *Natyashastra*.

Folk dances have a good deal with therapeutic approaches. Every dance form has its own style and is related to health problems. The overall physical well being and capacity of good health is the prime importance for all types of folk dances, though it is mainly related with mental enlistments. During long time practice in a particular type of dance form may cause changed physical effect to dancers. For example, *Bihu* is the folk dance of Assam and it is an aggressive dance performed by both boys and girls. The powerful dance form of Punjab *Bhangra* also needs good health and proper body movements. *Gair* and *Geendad* are folk dance forms of Rajasthan with almost military precision. *Karagam* is a folk dance of Tamilnadu and it needs proper body balance. Bengali folk dance like *Chou*, *Rayabese*, *Dhali* also needs proper body movement and strength. Any unfit posture in these or other dances can cause hazards to the dancers. The practice of these powerful dance forms of *Bhangra* (Punjab), *Karagam* (Tamilnadu), *Chou*, *Rayabese*, *Dhali* (Bengal) gives good physical health, strength, power and mental support. The survey conducted with folk dancers revealed that these dancers are physically and mentally more fit than the non-dancers of their locality. With the popularity it helps them to gain self-esteem, self-confidence and interest to learn to the young dancers. Thus many parents of folk culture are interested to train their children to dance forms. It also indirectly or directly helps in their educational studies, too.

Therapeutic Value of Innovative Dances

Innovative dances are modern dance styles which are formed by the proper admixtures of different kinds of dance forms. It has no distinct rule or regulation or bindings as has

been advocated by other classical dances. Though it sometimes takes into account of other dance forms like classical and folks, but it has its own path of dancing mode. Expressions and acting (*abhinaya*) are the major aspects of such types of dances. Orchestra instruments sometimes accompany these types of dances. Innovative dances are also considered as Oriental Dance forms. In India such type of dances was first initiated by the great Rabindranath Tagore. He did not consider the bound regulation of classical dances, and by different dance styles he established his own style, which is popularly known as *Rabindra Nritya*. Later on in the early part of twentieth Century Udayshankar modified modern dance style in a complete new vision and made the dances more glorify in front of whole world. Among his creations *Rhythm of life*, *Labour of Machinery*, *Lord Buddha*, etc. are important. Though unknowingly he used all aspect of dance therapy of modern days in his dance forms created long ago. His all production had the history of psychological effect on the spectators, which in now-a-days psychologists consider a form of psycho-therapy or dance therapy. The followers of this dance forms also have a very good physical body control. The *taal*, *laya*, *bhav* and *abhinaya* are the main part with proper use of music and song are the basic criteria of this kind of dances. These dances are the mean of tracking cultural exchange in a reciprocal interaction between eastern and western world. To correlate the changing audience profile it is important to modify the dance form in a new vision in mind with the past experience. Now-a-days different dancers are trying in their level to create something new form in dance and it in advance will flourish the innovative dance styles (Kashyap, 2005). It can be exemplified by the remarkable achievements by the famous dancer Sudha Chandran, who has become eminent dancer after her amputation of limb. The strong intension towards dance makes the miracle true in her life. It can be considered as a psychological and physical therapy to the dancer which leads to the goal. This is the real light to the student of dance that proper therapy and healthy approach in dance can make an impossible incident into a possible mode in life.

Innovative dances have immense importance for establishment of dance therapy in its actual direction. As these kinds of dances are modern and new, the proponents of such kinds have knowledge on the developing science of dance including therapeutic value. Different schools of western world are now working in these directions. In India today the dancers and dance therapists are conscious about this matter and in therapeutic sessions they actually improvise different dance movements according to the need. The therapeutic approach of innovative dance can be applicable in different diseases like irritable bowel syndrome, coronary atherosclerosis, hypertension, asthma, cardiac disease, anaemia, arthritis, gynaecological problems, muscular cramps, diabetes, stress etc. Among the Institutions Shristi Institute of Dance Therapy, Bangalore; Asian pacific therapeutic theatre; Bhoomika, Delhi; Nrityanjali Dance Therapy Centre, Indore; Sanved, West Bengal; Indian Spinal Injuries Centre, Delhi etc. conduct regular dance therapy workshops to control diabetes, stress, obesity, healing tool for patients and to improve physical and mental fitness. The first of its kind in India, Rabindra Bharati University, West Bengal has introduced dance therapy as a Post-Graduate Course in University level (UGC approved). In recent days Acharya Pratishtha Sharma, Syed Sallauddin Pasha,

Vyjayanthi Kashi, Tripura Kashyap, Preeti Patel, Alakananda Roy, Sohini Chakraborty and few others are working with physically and mentally challenged children and in special cases using dance as a mode of therapy and are constantly thriving to make them come out of their seclusion and isolation. During the past three to four decades, the practice of dance therapy using innovative dance forms, either singly or in combination along with some physical parameters, has been advocated to give good results not only in healthy volunteer but also in the management of various symptoms of many diseases with special reference to psychosomatic components.

Conclusion

As dance is mainly dealing with physical movements, it has an immense role in health science as well as from the therapeutic point of view. Other cultural aspects like drama also have such type of effect on human health, but the exercise like dance needs much confidence, body control, regular practice and proper movements. Any types of negligence or improper body movements may cause the dancer to be injured or it can even become fatal to the dancer. But by modulation in movements it can make glorious future to the dancers as well as dance itself. The breathing time and muscular control are very important in these regards. The age bar, accidental trauma, pregnancy, psychology, health hazard have direct influence on the therapeutic value of dance. Dance therapy can prevent a person from some health hazards and may also help to avoid unwanted problems. But for a wide application this topic should be highlighted by Government Organizations, NGOs and public sectors in forms of seminars, symposium, workshops, news, etc. to attract general people's interest.

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