DANCE - THE DIVINE THERAPIST - BHAKTI YOGA TO THERAPY

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Abstract

Customs and rituals are the foundation of the life of an Indian. Down the years various traditions and religious practices have influenced the plastic arts and the performing arts. The Indian Classical dances of India have their roots in the folk arts of their respective states and the folk arts have had a deep connection to the religious practices and rituals that priests and the common man, have inculcated, for a lifestyle based on virtue.

The dedicated spectator or Rasika of Indian classical dances, is familiar with dance presentations where the Nayika is shown pining for the Nayaka. While love for God can be depicted in various other relationships where the Supreme Soul is the friend, child, etc., classical dance chooses to emphasize more on the man-woman relationship to prove its point. Unfortunately, these representations stop at the mundane. There is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of its actual philosophical meaning. This is the Gyaana yoga or divine knowledge, which enlightens us that the dancer or Nayika is the human soul pining for the Nayaka, who is the Supreme soul or the Parmaatma.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s dancer as well as spectators, are well versed with the many possibilities that dance can offer, apart from its benefit as merely an exercise or medium to communicate with God. Various studies have been conducted on the therapeutic effects that dance has on persons, who consistently practise and perform this art. The performing arts and the plastic arts today have gained the status of an alternate therapy and dance holds an important position amongst these therapies. Indian classical dance has its roots in spirituality as well as science. This unique synthesis brings about an effective non-verbal form of communication, that also leads to holistic health. The therapeutic nature of dance on a physical level is already an established aspect. This study emphasizes mainly on the spiritual and metaphysical aspects, that could contribute to therapy. The relevance of this subject is towards all the dances universally and more specifically on the Indian classical dances.

Occasionally the art form of Bharata natyam is used as a reference as it is the area of expertise of the researcher.

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The sentiment of Bhakti is accepted in the Indian religious thought, as a form of yoga. The word yoga by itself is not restricted to the mundane, or the physical body postures. It is derived from the original root ‘Yuj’ which means ‘Union’ or the ‘coming together of’. From this, stems the concept of Bhakti yoga which is the very basis of the themes of Indian classical dances, where the dancer-devotee hopes to gain ‘union’ or ‘yoga’ with the Supreme soul. This lends to an elevated spiritual wellbeing.

Today the aspect of health is often related to only physical exercise, be it athletics or a performing art. But the concept of health needs to be viewed in its totality. According to Science professor Mrs. Ashalatha Benegal and
spiritual aspirant "the word Prakriti means nature and the five elements , but it also translates as ‘ one’s health’. It is only when man is in harmony with nature that overall health is achieved”.

The World Health Organisation defines health as:

Health is a state of complete physical , mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

Today positive health is said to be synonymous to spiritual health. Dance qualifies in every aspect. Dance movements involve the entire body deal with physical health. Recollecting the dance steps as well as the adherence to the rhythmic syllables of dance, lend mental equilibrium and the active participation in a dance class(stage contribute to the social health of the practitioner. This study mainly focusses on the Mudra therapy, Chakra healing, Aura therapy , Chromotherapy/ Colour therapy, Acupressure, Music therapy and Dance Movement Therapy(DMT). While each of these are individual therapies by themselves, this study views their existence in dance, thus validating dance as a therapy.

Mudra Therapy

Mudra essentially means a ‘symbol’. Mudras are also hand poses much like sign language, that accompany the body positions or asanas in Yogic practice. They are also seen as an accompaniment to ritualistic chanting in prayer . In Mudra therapy the tips of specific fingers come together to form a hand gesture, that is said to contribute to overall health. This is very close to the concept of Nyasa where the fingertips and palms are said to energize whichever part of the body it is placed on .The Nyasa practice is generally accompanied by sacred chantings that are also called Mantra, seen in Indian rituals.

According to Munira Shahid Rajput

Associate Professor, Government Degree College for Women, Islamabad, Pakistan :

" The term Mudra is derived from two words “mud” and “ra” means to rejoice or to be happy and to give, thus is action which offers delight or extreme joy. This is an indication that the practice of Mudra is concerned with sensory aspect. The other meanings of Mudra are " seal " and " mark " . The symbolic gestures are used in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain iconography, Indian classical dance, yoga exercises and sign language." Mudras are found in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam.

The Mudra therapy is based on the concept that a person’s hand is a scaled-down version of the human body and the human body is a scaled-down version of the universe. The five basic elements-space, air, fire, water and earth manifest in each of the fingertips of the palm. Akash (space) -middle finger and relates to sound, Vayu (air)-index finger and relates to touch, Agni (fire) - thumb and relates to vision, Jal (water) - little finger and relates to taste and Prithvi(earth) - ring finger and relates to smell.

Specific combinations of the above 5 elements decide the physical condition and the personality of a person. The tridosha theory of Ayurveda, classifies humans into Kapha, Vaata and Pitta categories. The combination of the air and space elements lead to the Vaata state. Fire and water are the Pitta state. Earth and water determine the Kapha state. These combinations are seen in the hand gestures or the mudras in Yoga and in the hastas in Indian Classical dance. Mudras impact our inner being as, each of the fingers correspond to various spiritual energy centres of the body called Chakras.

ACCORDING TO PROFESSOR MUNIRA SHAHID RAJPUT

"The chakras can be compared to transformers, as we know from the field of electricity. They collect the energy that flows into the body process and transform it and distribute it again. The chakras are similar to the intersection of the energy paths called nadis (streams), which supply them with energy and carry it off again. In addition they transform the frequencies into sensations that the human being understands thinking and feelings. They make sure that the lack of energy is compensated for and the diverse energies are in the right place."

The main energy centers or chakras are the Muladhara (root chakra) -base of the spine, Swadhishthana (sacral chakra)-below the belly button, Manipura (Solar plexus chakra) -above the navel, Anahata (heart chakra) - center of the chest, Vishudha( throat chakra) -hollow of the throat, Ajna(third eye chakra) between the eyebrows and Sahasrara(Crown chakra)-top of the head.

In Mudra therapy, the thumb corresponds to the Solar plexus chakra, the index finger to the heart chakra, the middle finger to the throat chakra, the ring finger to the root chakra and the little finger to the sacral chakra. The mudras that correspond to each of the chakras are : The Muladhara mudra-root chakra ,the Shakti mudra-Swadhishthana chakra, Rudra mudra-Manipura chakra, Padma Mudra-Anahata chakra, Granthitra mudra-Vishuddha chakra, Mudra-of the great-head to the Ajna chakra and Mudra-of-a-thousand-petals to the Sahasrara Chakra. When a prescribed Mudra is performed in yoga or ritual, it lead the activation of the chakras and the balancing of the five elements in the body.

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A similar process takes place when the hastas in dance are performed. The Bharata Natyam training involves 28 single hand gestures and 23 double hand gestures that are prescribed by the text- Abhinaya Darpana written by Nandikeshwara. In yogic practices the mudras are held for a longer duration, as an accompaniment to the body postures or asana. Similar benefits are also seen in Indian Classical dance where the artist would have held the hasta repeatedly down the years, in the long duration of training. A good example of this is the basic units of dance, or steps that are taught in the initial years where each step is done in three speeds. Here the dance hasta or hand pose would be held for a minimum of 3 minutes, much like it would have been in Yoga.

As mentioned, the systematic performing of mudra or hasta, activates the spiritual energy centres. These chakras are connected to the aura.

Aura Therapy
A person’s aura is the energy that is produced by their subtle body. There are 7 spiritual layers or koshas in the study of Aura, each of which correspond to the seven energy centres or Chakras. The seven sheaths of the aura are: the Etheric, Emotional, Mental, Astral, Etheric Template, Celestial and Ketheric Template of layers. These begin with the innermost, closest to the body, and finally, to the outermost, that is nearest to God.

The Root Chakra is the source of the Etheric layer, which is associated with the awareness of the physical body. This layer is predominantly in use, during the body movements of dance.

The Sacral Chakra corresponds to feelings and thus is connected to the Emotional layer. This kosa is activated when abhinaya dance pieces are depicted with the narrative aspect.

The Solar Plexus Chakra connects to the Mental layer and is formed by, our thoughts. This sheath is involved when an additional focus is required to recollect the sequences of the dance steps, the attention that is required to maintain spatial awareness while dancing, etc.

The Heart Chakra corresponds to the Astral layer. It connects the baser energies of our psyche and Chakras to the higher energies. This kosa is involved through every Indian Classical dance theme where the human soul (base) longs for union with the Supreme (higher energy).

The Throat Chakra is connected to the Etheric Template. This sheath is like a ‘template’ for the physical body in the astral plane. The Third Eye Chakra corresponds to the Celestial layer. This sheath relates to the process of enlightenment on receiving divine knowledge. It connects to the aspect of the spiritual love, or bhakti for God. The Crown Chakra corresponds to the Ketheric Template layer. This layer records our past karma and the path that we are to chart in this birth. It is said to be made of very thin threads of golden and silver light that connect to God. The last three sheaths are the very foundation of all dances universally. Through the divine theme or the elevation movements, the goal of dance is to reach higher spiritual awakening. Most dances have as their core theme, various narrations related to mythology, spirituality and depictions of deep philosophies.

The ritualistic nature of the mudras corresponds to the five Elements, the Chakras and the Aura. When various hand poses are performed in dance, each of these aspects interact with each other to bring about well being in the performer. The chakras are said to correspond to specific colours and this introduces the concept of chromotherapy or colour therapy in dance.

**CHROMOTHERAPY/COLOR THERAPY**

The colors of the chakra are said to decide the state of a person. This is determined on the basis of the emotional, spiritual and physical levels. The Root chakra is red in color, the Sacral chakra -orange, the Solar plexus chakra -yellow, Heart chakra -green, Throat Chakra -Blue Color, Third Eye Chakra -Indigo and the Crown Chakra is Violet. The colors of the chakra change, according to the change of emotions.

**ACCORDING TO A.R. HARI – AUTHOR OF THE MAGIC THERAPY OF COLOURS**

“Colour therapists believe that the hypothalamus in the human body controls the pituitary gland and as the former is influenced by light, it acts on the pituitary gland, which in turn controls all the other glands like the pineal, thyroid, thymus, adrenalin, pancreas, ovaries, etc.

The pineal gland response to light and produces melatonin, which is involved in maintaining the metabolic rhythm. Mystics believe that the pineal gland is linked to the Sahasrara Chakra on top of the head.

Colour therapy uses the sensitivity of a person to colour to identify and correct any imbalance in the body’s internal energy patterns that may be the cause of emotional or physical ill health.
According to colour therapists, every organ system has its own vibration energy and disease can occur when this energy is short. By applying the same colour, which has the same vibration energy, the disease can be overcome."

Specific colours for costumes or props, are chosen for a specific dance piece. This also includes the choice of lights that would be used for the performance. According to Indian Classical dance and mythology, specific colours correspond to specific deities, as well as to the emotions or the rasa. Each of these colors correspond to the aura, chakra and mudra that would be depicted while dancing.

The nine emotions or Navarasas are Shringara - love, Hasya - laughter, Karuna - sorrow, Raudra - anger, Vira - valour, Bhayanaka - terror, Bibhatsa - disgust, Adbhuta - wonder and Shanta - tranquil. Scientists state that each of the emotions evokes a colored aura. The colors of the emotions are based on the colors of the rainbow. Anger (red), excessive desire (orange), fearful (yellow), determination (green), hope (blue), compassion (indigo), and love (violet). Also represented are death (black) and life (white, which is an amalgamation of color).

**ACUPRESSURE THERAPY**

Most Indian Folk, Tribal and Classical dances are performed barefooted. While this is a mark of respect to the deity whom they invoke, the therapeutic effects are also acknowledged. According to Guru Kanaka Sudhakar:

"In my collaboration with Dr. Raman Kapur it was found that the foot movements on bare feet have preventative acupressure effects in such a way that a session of Indian Classical dance proves to be a perfect acupressure massage where so many diseases like poor eye sight, colitis, blood pressure, thyroid problems etc are cured or prevented from affecting the learner increasing substantially his/her immunity at the same time. This is because most of the internal organs have their nerve ending at the base of the foot or the planta. A child who learns or performs this art form incidentally gets the benefit of good health through the acupressure massage that goes on for years of rigorous training."

**MUSIC THERAPY**

Music carries emotional information. Indian classical dance is rooted in spirituality and religion. It is most natural that the music used for such dance is also of an elevated nature. Dances are performed to Mantra (Derived from the word mantra whichmeans 'how to think') bhajans, kirtans, hymns, carols and the compositions of the great saints. Mantras awaken the subtle power of words or Shabda. Scientists state that as it originates from Naada or divine sound. Naada is believed to originate from the Parmatma or the Supreme Soul. It is no wonder that Swami Chinmayananda calls music "the ornamentation of silence". Naada or sound is said to originate from the combination of fire and air elements.

According to the triguna theory, the music used for Indian classical dance is said to be of a Sattvika nature. The divine origin of music states that the Lord of dance Nataraja holds the Damaru, a two sided drum. From the damaru the sounds that emanated were 'eun' and 'rlk'. From these came the 14 sutras and from the sutras emerged grammar, tala (rhythm) and swara (musical notes).

Music like dance, is also said to take the practitioner closer to God. Swami Shivananda called musicians 'Naada Yogi' or the 'mediators of music'. Such music also corresponds to the various spiritual energy centres of the body as well as the the Aura. Each of the chakras have their own mystical syllables or chants:

- Muladhara – lam
- Svadhisthana – vam
- Manipura – ram
- Anahata - yam
- Vishuddha – ham
- Ajna – om
- Sahasrara – beyond sound or Anahata naada, which becomes heard only through a physical medium, which is then called the Aahata naada. (Transcending these is the Naada Brahman or The Supreme )

Apart from these, each of the chakras correspond to the swaras of the musical octave and are connected to the Elements or panchabhuta:

- Sa – Muladhara Chakra – Earth / Prithvi
- Ri – Swadhisthana Chakra – Water/Jal
- Ga – Manipura Chakra - Fire/Agni
- Ma – Anahatha Chakra – Air/Vayu
- Pa – Visuddha Chakra – Ether/Akasha

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Dha–Ajna Chakra - All Elements
Ni–Sahasrara Chakra – All Elements

Aparna M Sridhar the editor of Saamagaana: The First Melody,a magazine on classical music, mentions in her article, the observations of Dr Deepthi Navaratna - the Executive Director (Southern region) of the Indira Gandhi National Council for the Arts (IGNCA) and a former Harvard University professor:

"There is very little empirical experiment in Indian classical music these days. Starting from texts dealing with Sankhya philosophy to the NatyaShastra to the more recent lakshanagranthas in music like Swaramelakalanidhi( written by Ramamaya of the Vijayanagar empire in 1550), the psychological impact of musical concepts has been clearly worked out."

"To the best of my knowledge, while research data on active clinical use of Indian classical music in the past is limited, there are a lot of references to Raaga Chikitsa and the usage of certain ragas as adjuvants to ayurvedic therapy. Music as alternate/ adjuvant therapy to aid clinical intervention is identifiable in our music practices ". Aparna M Sridhar in her article also mentions the observations of Dr Shantala Hegde, assistant professor, neuropsychology unit, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru:

"In a recent electroencephalography (EEG) study on the impact of Indian classical music, especially of Hindustani ragas on individuals. After listening to Hindustani ragas, 20 musically untrained subjects showed increased overall positive brain wave frequency power, higher even than that in highly relaxed meditative states”. 

"Listening to certain ragas, for example Desi-Todi, for 30 minutes every day for 20 days, has been shown to produce a significant decrease in systolic and diastolic blood pressure, to reduce stress, anxiety and depression, and to enhance feelings of life satisfaction, experience of hope and optimism.”

Students of Indian Classical dance experience the rendition of a multitude of ragas in the duration of their training as well as at dance recitals. The rhythmic chant- like recitation of the dance syllables, correspond to our rhythmic heartbeats and the pulsating brain (the Alpha rhythm). Such constant beats are thus meditative and harmonious. Rhythmic chanting generates high intensity sound waves, that energize the subtle energies of the dancer.

Recollecting the complicated syllables and adhering to the rhythmic dance beats, increases concentration much like a brain gym. This also corrects speech impediments and is said to be equivalent to learning a new language which is prescribed for the prevention of Alzheimers and dementia. Since students and stalwarts of Indian classical dance are exposed to such Satvika music through the duration of their training, it is therapy on a metaphysical level.

Music activates the auditory, motor and limbic system of the brain triggering the brain to release dopamine, the feel-good hormone, into parts of the brain that cause overall well being. A Bharata Natyam recital comprises the nattuvangam(rhythmic cymbals), mridangam(two headed drum), violin, veena(stringed instrument), flute etc.

**ACCORDING TO SPIRITUAL GURU SRI SRI RAVISHANKARJI**

"The drums affect the Mooladhara (the base chakra or the first chakra). The big and small drums, their effect is from the Mooladhara to Swadisthana(second chakra). The big wind instruments like trumpets affect the second to third chakra (Swadhisthana to the Manipura). Metallic sounds affect the Manipura to Anahata(the fourth chakra)."

He further elaborates "The string instrument has its affects from the naval to the heart. Veena and Sitar – stringed instruments affects the Anahata (the heart chakra). Flute music, wind instruments and sometimes the piano sounds affect the Anahata to Vishudhi (the throat chakra). Bells, sounds of water, bird songs, very soft and subtle sounds have its effects from throat to the Ajna Chakra (in between the eyebrows). Then finally the Sahasrara the (top of the head) is affected by meditation and all other instruments put together at once”

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT)

All the above therapies, culminate in the Dance Movement therapy. This therapy is structured on the theory that the mind and body are connected and that both are impacted by one's good health or illness. The therapist encourages the patient/ performer to draw from their inner metaphysical resources to achieve well being. Dance movement therapists implement expressive and adaptive behaviors that are also communicative.

The American Dance Therapy Association defines dance/movement therapy as:

"The psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration of the individual” (2008).

Indian Classical Dances are therapeutic, mainly because they deal with and touch the psyche through their spiritual content and elevated purpose. Here the choice of musical instruments, rhythm, theme of the presentation etc. all contribute to the therapeutic nature of the physical poses and the resultant beneficial effect.

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CONCLUSION

Indian Classical dance can be visualized as a tree. Its roots being the various philosophies, techniques prescribed by the authoritative texts and the multiple theories and therapies that have been researched down the ages. According to science professor and spiritual aspirant Ashalatha Benegal, "dance is the performance of a prayer" where all the bodily functions and mind are channeled.

When art meets therapy, dance becomes 'therapies in motion'. The divinity of Indian Classical dance lends itself as therapy. Dance Therapy with a metaphysical outlook, brings together Science and spirituality. This acknowledges the importance of the study of anatomy as well as the role of the Human Soul in creative existence and endeavor.

It is also important that the individual dedicate themselves willingly to such therapy without a competitive outlook. Dance as a therapy needs be practised under professional supervision and guidance. It needs an acceptance that, it is a gradual process which requires for the individual, to give themselves time to get accustomed to it.

This theory is well summed up by psychotherapist Natalie Rogers: "What is creative is frequently therapeutic, what is therapeutic is frequently a creative process”

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