

An analytical discussion on the folk and tribal dance forms of Bengal in relation to their effect on health

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ABSTRACT

Dance increases total body movement, which helps to improve circulatory, respiratory, skeletal and muscular systems. It has a positive effect on physical health as well as mental and emotional wellbeing. In western world dance has been used as a form of therapy in many hospitals and medical settings, whether alternate or complementary. The effects of different folk and tribal dance forms of West Bengal on physical, mental and social health are discussed in this present study. In modern days the subject area of dance therapy reflects that it has its deep root in the *Bratachari movement*, initiated by Gurusaday Dutt in 1932 in India. The aggressive and martial dances like *Chou*, *Rayabese*, *Dhali* needs proper body movement, proper body balance and strength. The *Gambhira*, *Chaibari*, *Domphu*, *Jhumur*, *Mech*, etc dance forms are now using for the betterment of psycho-somatic diseases like depression, psychosis, autism, alzheimer, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactive syndrome, cognition problem, cerebral palsy, etc. The *Baul*, *Rabha*, *Baromashya*, *Bou nritya*, *Rajbanshi*, *Noila Broto*, *Nabanna*, *Tushu*, *Bhadu* dances play a major role in social psychology, social awareness and in the development of healthy atmosphere in society. As many of these dances are generally group dance form, it also helps the dancers to feel togetherness. The survey conducted with dancers revealed that these dancers are physically and mentally more fit than the non-dancers of their locality.

Keywords: Dance, Physical health, Mental health, Social health.

1. INTRODUCTION

Dance is a form of physical exercise and has the potential to motivate people as an active, non-competitive form of exercise. It has a positive effect on physical health as well as mental and emotional wellbeing (Clippenger, 1997). Actually dance increases the neurotransmitters called endorphins that have a control to increase a state of well-being. Many researches on different dance forms showed that dance increases physical fitness with increase in lung function, lung capacity, flexibility and aerobic capacity (Blair et al., 2001). Dance increases total body movement, which helps to improve circulatory, respiratory, skeletal and muscular systems (Quin et al., 2007). The specialized and psychotherapeutic uses of dance for the improvement of cognitive, behavioral and physical conditions are known as dance therapy. Dance therapy is based on the idea that body and mind are co-relational. The physical state of the body can affect the emotional and mental wellbeing both positively and negatively (Quin et al., 2007). Thus inspite of being a creative art form, dance can make a significant contribution to the healthy-living agenda of man (Marshall et al., 1998). In western world dance has been used as a form of therapy in many hospitals and medical settings, whether alternate or complementary, not only for physical health, but also for mental health as well (Clippenger, 1997). 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 practical implementation are limited in our country and thus necessitate in-depth research on the topic. Different body movements and the effects of different folk and tribal dance forms of West Bengal are discussed in this present study with the basic aim to understand their effects on physical and mental health. For this purpose an interview and survey based demographic study was done, using different questionnaires and medical checkup facilities, with a several numbers of dancers of each dance forms to have a conclusive statement. Moreover health related discussion, and therapeutic implementation of dance forms particularly in Bengal context has never been discussed in earlier reports and thus in this study it is a unique approach to contribution.

2. THERAPEUTIC APPROACH OF TRIBAL AND FOLK DANCES OF BENGAL

The diversity in culture and tradition reflects in the variety of Bengali folk dances. Basically folk dances of West Bengal reflect the heart of Bengali peoples, their history and imagination. These dance forms are rural in origin. Thus they are full of original scent of soil. They are preferred by ordinary peoples in every festive moods and it brings all participants in a complete forum. As these 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 West Bengal (Faubion, 1967). Folk dances are to some extent polished in nature as compared to tribal dance forms, though they do not have the disciplinary bindings of classical dance forms. Moreover many Bengali folk dances are the precursor of martial art forms. In western countries these martial art forms are now treated as the therapeutic events for patients (Kashyap, 2005). In modern days the subject area of dance therapy reflects that it has its deep root in the

Tribal dance:

The primitive dance forms, performed by tribal peoples, depicting their daily life and traditional being, are considered by tribal dances.

Dance therapy:

Dance therapy is the psychotherapeutic use of dance for emotional, cognitive, social, behavioral and physical conditions (American Dance Therapy Association).

Folk Dance

Folk dances are traditional dance forms performed at social functions, or festivals or special occasions by ordinary peoples. They are an inherited tradition rather than innovation and often learn informally. Folk dances are to some extent polished in nature as compared to tribal dance forms, though they do not have the disciplinary bindings of classical dance forms.

Martial dance:

Martial dance is a dance form using various self-defense techniques, based on techniques developed in ancient China, India, and Tibet, usually weaponless. The basic premise of this martial art is to practice self awareness, continuous physical listening and keeping healthy physical integrity in dynamic contexts.

Bratachari movement, though it was not mentioned in anywhere but the inner meaning is same in both of them. The *Bratachari movement* was a movement for spiritual and social improvement in India initiated by Gurusaday Dutt in 1932. The movement aimed at raising the self-esteem and national awareness among people of undivided India irrespective of religion, caste, sex or age. It was a comprehensive programme of physical, mental and intellectual culture based on the best folk traditions of physical exercise, art, dance, drama, music, singing and social service. The *Bratacharis* undertake to perform good deeds, strengthen fellowship and develop the mind and body through dance, especially *Rayabese*. *Bratachari* purports to present a complete synthesis of life, an integrated system of culture consisting of a complete philosophy of life. They are coupled with and expressed through a simple scheme of practical training and discipline for the building up of the inner life and character as well as the body, and also for the simultaneous and harmonious cultivation of the body and soul of man.

3. EFFECT OF BENGALI FOLK AND TRIBAL DANCE FORMS ON PHYSICAL HEALTH

Folk and tribal dances are related to major therapeutic approaches. 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. Every dance form has its own style and is related to health problems (Faubion, 1967). During long time practice in a particular form of dance may cause changed physical effect to dancers. For example the aggressive dances like *Chou*, *Rayabese*, *Dhali* needs proper body movement, proper body balance and strength. Any unfit posture in these or other dances can cause hazards to the dancers. The practice of these powerful dance forms gives good physical health, strength, power and mental support. The survey conducted with 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 now interested to train their children this dance forms. It also indirect or directly helps in their educational studies, too.

The *Chou* dance of Purulia district is a most important Bengali martial dance. It is given equal importance of classical dance forms now-a-days. The members of the Mahato, Kurmi, Bhumija, Deowa, Bhuama and Dom communities perform this vigorous dance form. This dance form includes acrobatic use of the body. The dancers wear masks and elaborate headgear. With the face covered by a mask, to portray emotions and make the dance lively the dancers depend on movements and postures. Present study revealed that powerful movements, immense concentration and release of energy are the significant features of this dance. Thus a prolonged practice of this dance form gives physical fitness. Beside this communication between the performers and the audience is a significant feature of this dance form. As the dance gains momentum, the performers and the spectators feel an air of excitement all around. In *Chou* dance the fight between good and evil always results in the victory of good over destructive evil. It generates hope among the audience.

The *Rayabese* is another martial dance performed by a group of male dancers with vigorous yells and the various sectional movements. The Bagdi, Bauri and Dom communities of Burdhaman, Birbhum and Murshidabad districts perform the dance. It is a significant and authentic reminder that the Bengalis were once renowned for their military bravery. The dance is a living tradition of the war dances of ancient Bengal. It was used by the infantry soldiers in the middle ages. This vigorous dance form includes mock fighting and acrobatics. Survey revealed that this dance form generates courage and daring in the hearts of the dancers. The *Laghur nritya* (stick dance) is an interesting martial folk art form of West Bengal. The stick is used as a weapon of self-defense from ancient time. The long sticks are used in this dance for the acrobatic feats. The *Ranapa* is another martial form of dance, where the artistes walk and dance on stilts. As the dancers display mock fights, they exhibit their skills of balancing on stilts. *Natua* is a highly acrobatic dance form involves many tricks with fire. *Dhali* and *Paika nritya* are heroic war dances and are evocative of the valour and prowess of the warriors. In *Dhali* dance the spectacular movements are formal with high aesthetic value by virtue of its intricate strategy and ordered formations. This dance form comprises more athletic exercises. *Chal Jhumgre Gele Nai* is a war dance which is rhythmic and martial in character.

4. EFFECT OF BENGALI FOLK AND TRIBAL DANCE FORMS ON MENTAL HEALTH

Each dance form has its own distinctive rhythm and dance style. The dance reflects the beauty of rural Bengal and adds colour to the palette of the folk culture of the state. In western world majority of therapeutic approaches of dance are dealt with mental health and psycho-somatic diseases. In depression, psychosis, autism, alzheimer, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactive syndrome, cognition problem, cerebral palsy, etc many tribal and folk dance forms are now using for the betterment (Kashyap, 2005). As these dance form are raw in nature and simple to get into heart, they are the best for mental therapy. From ancient India this is used for therapy by folk peoples, knowingly or unknowingly from time to time. In *Ayurveda* the indication of such treatment is also present. For example, during Durga Puja every beats of dhak bring a festive mood and holds a special place in every body's heart. Similarly dhol badan also has similar effect on human psychology.

Bauls are integral part of many districts of West Bengal as their footsteps dot the muddy village lanes of Bankura, Birbhum, Burdhaman, Nadia, Dinajpur and Murshidabad. They are free wanders and detached from the bondage of society and family. The Baul ideology, song and dance spread the message of peace and universal brotherhood. The Baul music had a significant influence on Rabindranath Tagore. Bauls are basically philanthropists, the root of their philosophical theory rests in a deeper complex psychological consciousness. When they move from village to village in rural Bengal among the illiterate village folk, their song and dances inspire others. They play a major role in stir up a feeling of nationalism, pride in our motherland, self esteem and self confidence. This is indeed a psychological therapy for mental health, and it is proved during Indian freedom struggle.

The *Santhali* is the dance form of Birbhum, Bankura, Malda and Burdhaman districts. The important feature of this dance is the unison in movement and simplicity of theme. The dancers stand in a line holding hands and move to the rhythm of *madol*. Survey conducted with the performers of these dance forms revealed the value of the group dance forms as indicated by psychologists. It gives coordination between men in a simple manner. In recent days these dance forms are using in different mental health homes among the psychologically challenged peoples to develop cognition in them. In psychotherapy story telling is an important features (Hamilton et al., 2006). In western world this kind of therapy is used for motor function coordination in different psycho-somatic diseases. The dances gaining importance for such approach includes *Gambhira*, *Chaibari*, *Domphu*, *Mech*, etc. *Gambhira*, a popular festival of Malda District, is related to agriculture and depicts the success, failure or annual production of crops. This dance includes symbolic events of poverty, social changes and vastness. The *Chaibari nritya* is a dance of tea garden workers of North Bengal. This dance form depicts the breathtaking backdrop of the verdant tea gardens. In *Domphu nritya* of North Bengal the dances give expression to the joys, hopes and aspirations of the community through the colorful dance. In *Kukri nritya* of North Bengal the girls ceremoniously hand over their traditional weapon, the Kukri, to their brothers before they set off for the war. It causes psychological bushing among the fighters. The inner rhythm that pervades the simple life of the tribal people living in harmony with nature can be observed and felt in *Mech* dance form, originated in Jalpaiguri district. In the *Mesa Glang Nai dance*, performed by the *Mech* women, the

youth of the community is exhorted to be industrious and hardworking. The young members of the community are reminded that they must always retain the purity of their minds and bodies.

5. EFFECT OF BENGALI FOLK AND TRIBAL DANCE FORMS ON SOCIAL HEALTH

Dances play a major role in social psychology, social awareness and in the development of healthy atmosphere in society (Jennifer and Karola, 2005). Some tribal and folk dance forms teach social duty to peoples and make them aware towards their duty. For example, the *Kirtan* dance is the most widely practiced folk dance form of Bengal. The democratic nature of the dance, which unites people of the whole village, irrespective of their caste or social standing is its most striking feature. The great spiritual leader, Shri Chaitanya Dev gave the dance a national character. *Ganga baidya* is a dance of *Bedes* (the snake charmers) of Bengal. The dance gives expression to the daily lives, customs, hopes and aspirations as well as the pains and tribulations of this sect of people of rural Bengal. Through their songs and dances, the fearless *Bedes* sold snake venom and talismans to the villagers, promising them that these would keep evil away.

The *Jhumur* dance, emerged from Purulia, Birbhum, Bankura and Burdhaman district, is a secular dance form accompanied by fast-paced. In contrast, in *Dhamail* dance the clapping brings a rhythmic element into the otherwise slow-paced dance. In Malda and Murshidabad district during *Gajan* festival the dancers undergo penance with a view to attaining salvation and becoming free of worldly sufferings. Being a festival of austerity, the dancers often fast before a performance. The survey conducted with the performers revealed more pain tolerance among the dancers in comparison to non-dancers. The performance involves some harrowing rituals and is usually performed by the lower castes. The involvement of the upper castes is limited to bowing down before the lower castes for just this one time in the year. Sociologists consider this important in the view of social health. Some of the tribal dance forms depict the social life and ideology. The *Rabha* dance of North Bengal depicts the daily life of the community and embodies the merriment that enlivens all their festivals. The Bengali community is known for the warm hospitality it extends to visitors. When a guest arrives unannounced, he is greeted warmly and made to feel welcome. The host makes every effort to ensure a comfortable stay. The *Baromashya* songs and dances describe this endearing quality of the simple folk of rural Bengal. *Bou nritya* of Srihatta enacts the custom of asking a new bride to dance; a process of helping her shed her inhibitions. The dancers never lift their feet off the ground during the entire performance. Through this dance of initiation, the new bride is welcomed into her new family.

Many tribal dance forms also highlight their dependence on nature and convey awareness to natural conservation. Among them the *Rajbanshi* dance is performed to invoke the blessings of the river Goddess of North Bengal. The fisherman community of rural Bengal prays to *Ganga Devi* in the month of Chaitra through *Ganga* dance. Through their prayers and dances, they appease the Goddess, so that she bestows blessings on them throughout the year. Originating from the districts of Bankura, Purulia, West Burdhaman and Birbhum, the *Bhadu* dance is performed mainly during the monsoon. Farming is an integral part of the lives of villagers in rural Bengal. After whole day toil, the villagers often sing and dance as a welcome break from their daily routine of labour and hard work. *Noila Broto* is an example of such dance form. *Tushu* is another harvest dance originating from the districts of Bankura, Purulia and Midnapore districts. *Nabanna* is an expression of the happiness of the farmers' families after a successful autumn harvest.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study revealed that the practice of such folk and tribal dance forms can change the health pattern among the practitioners. It has simultaneously a deep impact on society as a psycho-social act and generating awareness towards natural conservation. At the same time by a title change in lifestyle with a regular dance practice we can modify our health towards a positive future.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

1. This study, within the limit of available resource, has provided useful information on folk and tribal dance form of Bengal in concern with health science.
2. It has availed researchers the opportunity to study more on the usefulness of dance practice towards physical, mental as well as social aspects.

FUTURE ISSUES

The present study leads to the direction of more and more finding on the therapeutic movements of various dance forms, originating from India and abroad, for the benefit of mankind towards healthy lifestyle in a golden future.

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RELATED RESOURCE

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