



From Tradition to Therapy: Integrating Kalā and Śāstra in Kathak for the Holistic Development of Children with Cerebral Palsy



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Abstract

This paper explores the therapeutic integration of Indian classical Kathak dance for the holistic development of children with Cerebral Palsy (CP). The arts in Indian culture, including Kathak, have always served a dual purpose: preserving tradition through storytelling and providing cognitive, social, and emotional benefits. This study posits that Kathak's unique blend of structured rules (Śāstra) and artistic expression (Kalā) can serve as a powerful therapeutic tool. We investigate how the systematic application of Kathak's rhythmic cycles (Laya) and codified movements (Hasta Mudras) can foster physical growth, while its expressive storytelling (Abhinaya) can aid non-verbal communication and emotional regulation. By applying these concepts, children with CP can build confidence and challenge societal expectations. This approach enhances their social interactions, demonstrating how a framework rooted in Kathak's aesthetics can significantly improve their quality of life. Ultimately, the methodology aids emotional management and instils a strong sense of belonging, thus promoting the social inclusion and holistic development of these children.

Keywords: Kathak, Kalā, Śāstra, Cerebral Palsy (CP), Therapeutic Framework, Holistic Development

Research Paper

Introduction

In Indian culture, performing arts like Kathak are more than just entertainment. They've always helped preserve traditions by telling stories, teaching lessons, and celebrating important events. These arts also bring real developmental benefits: they sharpen cognitive skills like memory and problem-solving, and boost social and emotional abilities such as empathy and teamwork. Additionally, they're used therapeutically to improve mental well-being by reducing stress. This paper aims to explore how Indian Classical Kathak Dance can greatly improve the social inclusion and quality of life for children with cerebral palsy (CP). We try to look how Kathak uses its structured rules (Śāstra) - like specific rhythms and movements - alongside its vibrant artistic expression (Kalā) - through gestures and storytelling - to directly foster growth in children with CP. Applying

Kathak's concepts and techniques helps these children communicate non-verbally, build confidence, and challenge societal expectations. This approach helps create an inclusive space that significantly improves their social interactions, aids emotional management, and instils a strong sense of belonging. This paper shows how Kathak's unique blend of Kalā and Śāstra can be a powerful therapeutic tool, helping children with Cerebral Palsy truly become part of society.

Research Problem

Children with Cerebral Palsy (CP) face not only physical limitations but also significant challenges in social inclusion and emotional management. (Gowthami.) While conventional therapies are crucial for functional gains, they often lack a holistic, engaging, and culturally resonant component. This study addresses the need for

a therapeutic framework that moves beyond traditional clinical models to foster a more profound sense of self-awareness, social connection, and quality of life for these children.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this paper are to—

1. Investigate how integrating the structured principles (*Śāstra*) and artistic expression (*Kalā*) of Kathak can promote the holistic development of children with Cerebral Palsy.
2. Demonstrate how this unique methodology can improve the social interactions and quality of life for children with CP, promoting their social inclusion and holistic development.

Hypothesis

This paper posits that a therapeutic framework rooted in Kathak's aesthetics can significantly improve the quality of life, aid emotional management, and instill a strong sense of belonging, thus promoting the social inclusion and holistic development of children with Cerebral Palsy.

Relevance of the Study

This study is relevant because it bridges the gap between ancient Indian wisdom and modern therapeutic practice, offering a culturally relevant and non-clinical alternative to conventional treatments. By demonstrating how the principles of *Śāstra* and *Kalā* can be applied to address the specific physical and emotional needs of children with CP, this research provides a new model for therapeutic intervention. It highlights the potential of using art to not only restore function but also to build confidence, challenge societal expectations, and foster a true sense of belonging. (Gaur.)

Important Concepts

The *Kalā* and *Śāstra* aspect of Indian classical Kathak dance:

This paper proposes that a therapeutic framework rooted in Kathak's aesthetics can build upon these principles. By applying the dance's unique blend of structured rules (*Śāstra*) and vibrant artistic expression (*Kalā*), this approach can significantly improve the quality of life for children with CP.

The *Śāstra* aspect of Indian classical performing arts is the deep, written knowledge behind the performances. These old texts, mostly in Sanskrit, serve as rulebooks

and philosophical guides all in one. They explain everything—from the specific techniques and movements to the deeper ideas about beauty, the effects on our minds, and the spiritual meaning of the art. This codified system provides the theoretical and philosophical backbone for the arts, ensuring that their principles are preserved and understood. (Bhate 45)

The most prominent *Śāstric* text influencing Indian classical dance, including Kathak, is the *Nāṭya Śāstra* by Bharata Muni. This ancient treatise, dating back perhaps to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, meticulously outlines every aspect of performance, from dramatic composition and stagecraft to intricate body movements, costumes, and the use of music. The *Nāṭya Śāstra* provides the foundational understanding of:

- **Rasa Theory:** This central aesthetic concept explains how specific emotional states (*bhava*) are conveyed by the performer to evoke corresponding aesthetic experiences (*rasa*) in the audience. This systematic approach to emotion is a direct application of *Śāstra*, guiding the dancer's expressive vocabulary.
- **Abhinaya (Expression):** The *Nāṭya Śāstra* categorizes *abhinaya* into four types (*Angika, Vachika, Aharya, Satvika*), providing detailed instructions on how to use the body, speech, costume, and inner emotional states to communicate effectively. Kathak's emphasis on intricate facial expressions and *hasta mudras* (hand gestures) directly draws from these detailed *Śāstric* classifications. (Azad, 70)
- **Body Mechanics and Movement Vocabulary:** Although Kathak's movement vocabulary evolved to include elements like rapid spins (*chakkars*) and complex footwork patterns (*tatkar*), the underlying principles of body alignment, balance, and the classification of movements (*Anga Sanchalan*) can be traced back to the detailed anatomical and kinetic descriptions found in texts like the *Nāṭya Śāstra* and later treatises such as the *Abhinaya Darpan*. (Azad, 72)

The *Kalā* aspect of Kathak is built on a few core elements that make it a complete and expressive art form. At its heart is *Laya*, the rhythmic structure that governs the tempo of the dance, from slow to fast, and is expressed through the dancer's percussive footwork (*tatkar*). This provides the technical foundation. The soul of Kathak is *Abhinaya*, the art of storytelling and expression, which uses the face, gestures, and body to convey a wide range



of emotions (bhava) and moods (rasa). It's through this that the dancer communicates with the audience. (Bhate 50) Finally, Anga Sanchalan refers to the graceful, controlled movements of the entire body, from the major limbs to subtle eye and neck movements. This element ties the rhythm and expression together, creating the visual poetry and disciplined choreography that are hallmarks of the style.

- These core elements can be adapted for therapeutic use (Bhate, 217) by isolating and modifying them to meet specific rehabilitative goals for children with cerebral palsy (CP). This approach transforms artistic principles into a structured, engaging therapeutic framework.
- Kathak dance can be adapted for therapy by simplifying its elaborate movements into manageable gestures. For instance, the dance's footwork or Tatkar and also the rhythmic phrases or even the Tāla or the more complex Laya concept can be utilized to help a child with cerebral palsy enhance motor control and balance. The expressive hand gestures or hasta mudras, can be used to build fine motor skills and provide a non-verbal means of communication. Similarly, the body movements can be modified to improve flexibility and posture. This method uses the natural beauty and structure of Kathak to make therapy more enjoyable and culturally meaningful for children.

Cerebral Palsy (CP)

Cerebral palsy is a group of permanent disorders affecting the development of movement and causing a limitation of activity. Non-progressive disturbances that manifest in the developing fetal or infant brain can lead to cerebral palsy; this is the most common cause of childhood disability. The degree and type of motor impairment and functional capabilities vary depending on the etiology. Cerebral palsy may have several associated comorbidities, including epilepsy, musculoskeletal problems, intellectual disability, feeding difficulties, visual abnormalities, hearing abnormalities, and communication difficulties.

The 'Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016' defines 'Cerebral Palsy' as a Group of non-progressive neurological conditions affecting body movements and muscle coordination, caused by damage to one or more specific areas of the brain, usually occurring before, during or shortly after birth. ("The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016")

Cerebral Palsy is not a progressive condition; meaning it does not get worse with time; though the exact symptoms can change over a person's lifetime. The symptoms of CP vary from person to person. A person with severe CP might need to use special equipment to be able to walk, or might not be able to walk at all and might need lifelong care. A person with mild CP, on the other hand, might walk a little awkwardly, but might not need any special help.

All people with CP have problems with movement and posture. Many also have related conditions such as intellectual disability; seizures; problems with vision, hearing, or speech; changes in the spine (such as scoliosis); or joint problems (such as contractures).

Research Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative, action-oriented approach. The study involved a therapeutic intervention in which the researcher adapted elements of Kathak dance for children with Cerebral Palsy. The methodology was as follows:

1. Framework Design

The therapeutic framework was developed by deconstructing Kathak's complex elements. The rhythmic structure of Laya was simplified to improve motor control, while the expressive hand gestures of Abhinaya were used to build fine motor skills and provide non-verbal communication outlets. The controlled body movements of Anga Sanchalan were modified to enhance flexibility and posture.

The researcher used movements set to songs in a local language, rather than conventional movement therapy, as a unique approach for children with cerebral palsy (CP). This method is a powerful tool for holistic development, going beyond typical physical training. The familiarity of the local language makes the learning process more accessible and helps children feel secure. By connecting dance with culturally resonant songs, the approach effectively enhances emotional expression and social connection. It provides a safe space where children can non-verbally communicate and explore feelings, fostering a strong sense of inclusivity and belonging. Ultimately, this methodology celebrates every movement, promoting communication and peer connection through a shared, joyous cultural experience.

मुंगीबाय मुंगीबाय

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इकडून तिकडे नेता काय खाता काय पिता काय

दारे खिडक्यांच्या खिंडी बुरजासम तांब्या भांडी
त्यांच्या मागून या सरकत रांग उतरते बघ घसरत
कसे समजते मुंगीबाय कोणी ठेवले कोठे काय
कोठे साखर कुठे रवा कुठे मिठाई कुठे खवा
कुठे कणीक अन् भात कुठे कुठे जाम अन् केक कुठे
चॉकलेट ही पापलेट ही जे जे सांडे संपून जाय

विरोधात जर कुणी आले समजा त्याचे ग्रह फिरले
अशा धावता सर्व मिळून झन झन घेता चावून
तुमच्या बहिणी जरी काळ्या गरीबासम त्या भोळ्या
तुमचा झेंडा का हो लाल मला एवढे सांगून जाल
इतके नेऊन करता काय बिळात सारे भरता काय
कशास साठा करायचा जन्म धावून सरायचा
जरा सोडूनि या ना काम कामाच्या नानाची टांग
मुंगीबाय येता काय निवांत थोडे बसता काय

काय काय हे करशी काय पळण्यावाचून उपाय काय
कधी ना थांबे माझा पाय अन् बोलाया वेळच नाय
रांगेमध्ये जन्म जरी मुळी ना आम्ही दीन तरी
जन्म थोडका काम अफाट म्हणून अविरत चालू वाट
कामाचे हे आम्हा पिसे कामामध्ये राम दिसे
जग हे जरी मुंगी म्हणते हत्तीला मी लोळवते
अधिक बोलणे गरजच नाय (Sandeep Khare)

2. Implementation:

The selection of the song "Mungi bai, Mungi bai" (मुंगीबाई मुंगीबाई) for this research was a deliberate pedagogical choice aimed at therapeutic goals. The song's energetic and playful tempo was chosen to encourage joy and spontaneity, which is vital for engaging children emotionally. The movements designed for this song were exclusively gross motor actions, focusing on large, whole-body gestures to maximize physical participation. This emphasis on broad, expansive movements, rather than intricate gestures, offers a robust and accessible framework for children with cerebral palsy to enhance their balance, coordination, and motor planning, while also providing a dynamic way for them to express their emotions.

During the teaching process, it was realized that the song's movements conveyed a message of acceptance that went beyond mere physical action. The children were encouraged to embrace themselves exactly as they

were. Even though this song isn't directly tied to their academic curriculum, it teaches them indirectly through dance, where the lessons of self-acceptance become a natural part of their experience.

3. Observation and Analysis:

The researcher observed the children's responses and progress during the teaching process, noting how the movements and lyrics conveyed messages of self-acceptance and encouraged persistence. The observations revealed how dance became a medium for self-discovery and an indirect lesson in emotional management and self-worth.

In therapeutic context, dance transcends mere physical activity; it becomes a profound medium for self-discovery and a mechanism for connecting with the world. The observations during practice reveal a process of incremental growth and resilience. The core message impart is one of finding intrinsic joy in the process and allowing that joy to be the primary motivator. This philosophy is deeply embedded within the lyrics of the song "Mungi bai, Mungi bai" (मुंगीबाई मुंगीबाई), which serves as a metaphorical guide for the children.

The song's verses encapsulate this therapeutic philosophy:

- **काय काय करशील काय पळण्यावाचून उपाय काय** (You have no other choice but to keep running/moving). This line, which translates to "Sometimes, moving forward is the only solution—stopping isn't an option anymore," emphasizes persistence and the inevitability of progress.
- **कधी न थांबे माझा पाय अन बोलाया वेळच नाय** (My feet never stop, and I have no time to talk). This verse, meaning "Because action speaks louder than words—life keeps moving, and so do I," underscores the value of action over verbal comparison or self-doubt.
- **रांगेमध्ये जन्म जरी मुळी न आम्ही दीन तरी** (Born somewhere in the line, but never meant to be meek). This powerful statement, which translates to "Our beginnings may have been humble, but we were never weak or pitiful," is a lesson in self-worth and inner strength, regardless of one's starting point.
- **जन्म थोडका काम अफाट म्हणून अविरत चालू वाट** (Life is short, work is vast—so I keep walking, endlessly). This final line, meaning "There's so much to do, and so little time—so the journey never stops," inspires a continuous, purposeful journey of self-improvement.



Through these lessons, dance becomes a vehicle for teaching something both simple and profoundly powerful: that a meaningful life is about moving forward with wholehearted engagement and happiness. The focus is on the personal journey rather than on external validation or comparison with others. By embracing their own unique movements and celebrating their own pace, the children are encouraged to discard worries about external judgment. (Rana.) This practice of self-acceptance and persistent effort is where true strength and confidence are cultivated, laying a foundation for their holistic development.

Conclusion

While conventional treatments like physical therapy (PT) and occupational therapy (OT) are indispensable for restoring specific physical functions, they often operate within a highly structured, clinical framework focused on measurable outcomes. In contrast, arts-based therapies offer a fundamental way to heal the body, engage the mind, and achieve self-awareness. Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), for instance, provides a valuable clinical approach for children with cerebral palsy (CP) by using structured movement, rhythm, and creative expression to address both physical and emotional challenges. It improves a child's gait and balance, helps them communicate non-verbally, and enhances emotional regulation in a fun, non-clinical environment.

This holistic view of healing is not a modern innovation. Ancient Indian treatises, such as the Nāṭya Śāstra and the medical system of Ayurveda, used arts like dance and music as a natural part of a healthy life, seeing no distinction between health, art, and spirituality. They applied principles that are now mirrored in DMT, using specific melodies to balance the body and mind, and expressive movements to help individuals understand and manage their emotions. In this way, these traditions have long recognized the arts as a fundamental path to healing and self-awareness.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that a therapeutic framework rooted in Kathak's aesthetics offers a powerful and effective methodology for the holistic

development of children with cerebral palsy (CP). By integrating the structured principles of Śāstra and the expressive vocabulary of Kalā, this approach goes far beyond the functional gains of conventional therapies, creating a comprehensive approach that integrates the body, mind, and spirit. The use of a culturally resonant art form provides a non-clinical environment where children are not just improving motor skills through the systematic use of laya and anga sanchalan, but are also embarking on a journey of self-discovery and emotional growth. Abhinaya provides a vital non-verbal channel for emotional expression and regulation, while the messages embedded in songs and the philosophy of joyful, consistent effort cultivate a profound sense of self-acceptance and resilience. By connecting to their heritage and finding joy in movement, these children are not merely being rehabilitated; they are being empowered to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting their social inclusion.

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