

# THE ART OF TRANSCENDENCE IN CLASSICAL INDIAN DANCE

**Shila Mehta**

Kathak Dance Artist  
Founder and Artistic Director  
Nupur Zankar Academy of Research and Dance Centre, Mumbai, India; New Jersey, USA  
shilamehta1@gmail.com  
+91 9821218386

## *Abstract*

The aim of this paper is to draw on theoretical and applied aspects of Indian Classical Dances in order to highlight why and how such forms are well aligned with the principles of Transcendence. We live in a time where the challenges of today are arguably more complex than generations before, be this at the individual, community or societal or environmental levels. I draw on a range of evidence and experience to describe key features of classical dance forms of India in particular, including how learning and growing within these forms progresses towards a state of transcendence. I contend that this transcendence is underutilized for humanity to progress kindness, connectivity, and stability in mind and body.

## INTRODUCTION

Every component of Indian dance is infused with the principles of yoga making it transcendental in nature creating an urge to return to the SELF-Source/the Core/the Origin of Being - Journey from Form to Formless- from Matter to Spirit- from pleasure to meaning- from ignorance to bliss - from conventional practice of dance to higher practice of dance.

Indian culture is rich with writings stemming from a range of key philosophers that have helped enhance practice within domains such as yoga and the classical performing arts. Notably, there has always been a key focus on internal development rooted in such forms. Though the classical performing arts have arguably reached a high in terms of take up and embedding themselves internationally across cultures, the extent to which its transcendental aspect within Dance practitioners and artists communities and of their true value within society has been realized is still debatable.

Within this research, drawing based on the living experience it will seek to apply scientific rigor in exploring questions such as what the literature tells us about arts for transcendence, and wellbeing, and gather primary data to address whether different groups in society recognize and value this contribution. This body of work will provide a platform to build consensus on how Indian classical arts could be imparted in a way to address deep issues in societies globally such as the mental health crisis.

The PhD will be relevant not only to the artist community but also to public health policy makers, for example through linking to the momentum towards social prescribing, considering the evidence base or potential for it to raise awareness of the physical, mental, and neurological, cognitive benefits of engaging in culturally rooted practices.

## RATIONALE

We as humans are blessed with the aspect of Awareness. Spirituality is all about recognizing this awareness to deal with day-to-day thoughts, actions, reactions, in conscious manner to live to our best potentials resulting into fulfillment and quality Life. Our classical dances are yogic actions one of the most effective mediums to progress on the Spiritual path.

Natyashastra has always talked about this aspect of transcendence and well-being in Rasa theory. It is all about enhancing the quality of life and in turn the society at large. This leads to psychological inquiry into the subject. Now the question is that have we achieved the fullest potentials of performing Arts in today's time? Has the power of Arts been recognized by the bigger section of Society or for that matter that section of society who are powerful, resourceful, and influential? If so, then in what percentage? Is it Myth or reality?

Are these dance Arts in the hands of hypocrites and are employed or used for the purpose for which are not its areas and hence limits the growth.? Does not our Dance education need to relook into? This makes me to go for

the research to understand better the machinery for the advancement of creating Need for the Arts, to strengthen the areas of dance education, to influence the minds of the policy makers of dance arts to bring change in viewing at the classical dances of India.

Dance Appreciation as Soft Power /Soft Culture,the intangible human heritage are deeply rooted in well-being as central to day-to-day life. It is a vehicle of transcendence for humanity and It is important to understand philosophy to understand Indian Dances better.

This is reflected in different traditions and in different fields that are rooted in Indian heritage, including Indian Dance, Music, Arts and Literature.

Classical Indian Dances are deeply rooted in Indian Philosophy

According to Kapila Vatsyayan” Art was a discipline (Sadhana), Yoga and a sacrifice ( Yagna).

The Artist did practise Arts in search of infinite and made efforts to reveal this attainment by recreating this Infinite through sound, geometrical lines,movement,symbols,language .Through this he attempted to create a state of Aananda( Bliss).More than artistic creation his seeking was more about absolute bliss in Brahman( Brahmananda).The aesthetic experience was considered second only to the supreme experience and was thus termed its twin brother ( Brahmananda-Sahodara).

According to Swami Vivekananda Religion, Arts and Science are three ways in which one can reach the infinite except that you need Advaita philosophy to understand this to enable one to touch the dimensions of enlightenment. But it must be that kind of art and practiced with the intention to reach and express and embody the infinity. Indian literature, thoughts, and culture reflects the traces of such philosophy. Spiritual elements are present since time immemorial. Classical Indian dances are no exception having the nature of transcendence at their core. They can be considered as access points for not only to the understanding of this ultimate reality but to transcend mundaneness to have the direct experience of higher dimensions of reality by expanding consciousness just like in Yoga.

The Yogic and Upanishadic text have always talked about the purpose of life as to experience the formless, consciousness and to attain a state of bliss. Indian culture tells the story of its journey from the formless to Form and back to Formless. Dances from this cultural backdrop are about experiencing this journey. They are extremely rich in content. They have the elements of history, psychology, mythology, math, geometry, philosophy, symbolism, and spirituality. They are multitextured and multi layered. Many layers are yet to be peeled.

Both for physical and mental health related issues, medical, psychological and behavioral sciences have moved awareness, assessment and support much further but in addition to these sciences, Maharishis, yogis, and intellectuals have gifted to us the powerful system of the body-mind discipline that is accommodating many levels of consciousness and the Classical Indian Dance system is one example. It roots stem from the Natya Shastra is an ancient treatise on the performing arts which includes theatre, dance, and music. It is based upon Gandharveda. It consists of 6000 sutras incorporated in 36 chapters. It is notable for its RASA theory which emphasizes that entertainment is the desired effect of performance arts but not the primary goal. The primary goal is to transport /transcend the individual in the audience into another parallel dimension to represent the reality to attain bliss.

Indian dance has sustained itself for 5000 years, right from dancing girls of Indus Civilization until today on the stage, This only speaks volumes of its strength. According to Aanada Coomaraswamy,a strength of these dance forms is its profound one common source which has not changed. It is rooted in the process of the dhyana and sadhana of the artists which transforms into an integral vision of arts. It is one’s choice where to find the connection to the dance, as it inherently has so much to offer. There are multiple layers that are waiting to be peeled, multiple experiences waiting to be lived.

#### **Dance and Yoga:**

The Lord Shiva who is considered as highest yogi is the God of Classical Indian Dance. Krishna is the Hero of Indian Classical Dance. Most of the dance themes in these forms are Krishna centered with playfulness, full of life and exuberance. He is more action oriented. On the contrary, Shiva is painted as a figure sitting on Kailash Mountain with eyes closed in a meditative pose. He is more Shoonya (no action) oriented.

The Indian philosophy of Formless to Form and back to formless is cyclic in nature. Practicing Classical Indian Dance leads a practitioner to become more aware of this knowledge by understanding the deeper meaning of dancing Krishna and Shiva theme.

Dance just as yoga is the science of body, mind and soul. Yoga is about meditating in stillness, in silence whereas Dance is about meditating in organized movements, in naad (sound). Both aim for a state of transcendence - one with the beauty of artistic expression and other with constant introspection.

### Study and Analysis of the data:

Classical Indian Dance forms are a perfect scientific language of the expression of body, mind, and spirit. Dance itself constitutes following elements.

*Basic Posture and movements:* A Human body is a miniature of the Universe. The basic stance and movements of the classical Dancer has the influence of Mandala (geometrical patterns representing the cosmos, meta-physically), Yantra (sacred geometrical patterns/arrangements which emits cosmic positive energies, curb negative energies to uplift spiritually) and cosmic energy (Life force). The sacred geometry energized with the cosmic energy created through dance movements is used to transcend. Here the Dancer is in tune with existence in those moments triggering in an expanded state of higher consciousness. It dissolves the aspect of duality. Dancer disappears and only Dance remains. Ego dissolves and spirit shines.

*Centering of the eyes:* In Yoga practice, centering meditation is very common. The aim is to bring stillness to mind and to train the mind to become present and to quiet the mind. Indian Dance has pure dance and storytelling elements. In both, the Taal, laya, rhythm and character are visualized. The dancer uses the power of imagination to create a parallel dimension of pure joy and bliss with an aim to share this aesthetic experience by transporting the audience to that dimension of the Reality. Dancers are trained to look beyond the physical dimensions by bringing their focus in the center- the center point of Universe, Body, Life.

*Turns:* Are the universal expression of Joy for a human at any age. A Kathak dancer is trained to be on axis and keep proper balance to have access to the center point of the body through which the turns revolve. One enjoys the moment of presence for that moment. In Sufi traditions the turns demonstrate the ecstatic love and spiritual joy in communion with the divine. Sufi rituals are popular where participants attempt to reach an ecstatic state through Dance whirls (turns) movements and music.

*Padhant (Recitation):* Means recitation and a system of spoken “words” created for each sound (naad). Dancers dance on the sounds which are created from Music and percussion instruments These are sounds that once you consecrate and energize this sound, it becomes naad yoga according to the Masters. The practice of Padhant is often compared with chanting of Mantras.

***Cycle of Laya & the presence of Sam (The first beat of Taal) :Hindu philosophy represents the trinity of 3 lords. Brahma-The creator, Vishnu- Protector, Mahesh- dissolution. In Dance this philosophy shines through the laya depicting 3 stages of Life. The three states of Utpatti, Sthiti & Samagam-representing the trinity of Indian philosophy is experienced in dance resulting into transcendental stage of eternal bliss.***

*Presence of Sam:* Sam is the first beat of Taal (rhythmic cycle). It is accented more than any other beats. Its importance is enhanced in many ways by the great masters and performers of different times describing it as one of highest emotional points in the Indian dance and music system. E.g., 16 Beats of Teen Taal are like Gopis (women) trying to reach Krishna which is Sam. The access point to the state of transcendence.

*Meditation- A Psychedelic experience:* Meditation is in the context of Riyaz (practice) those moments when one is switched off from normal routine activities to such activities to transcend mundane experience with the engagement to Higher Self -the highest state of consciousness. This is a psychedelic experience, which is a temporary altered state of consciousness induced by the movements, music, rhythm, and visualization.

Classical Indian Dance and Music function at four levels. I gained this understanding/knowledge, from my Taal Vidya Guru Pandit Suresh Talwalkar ji, which I will now discuss.

The Four Levels in Indian Classical Dance and Music Function

*Shastra (rule and discipline)-* Guru ji says that shastra is the basic foundation of Classical Dance and Music. Shastra talks about the fundamental dos and don'ts of the discipline as well as material of the form. Shastra cannot be taught as such- it is not like education imparted in Schools for example. It can be understood from a Guru. E.g., understanding of the structures of taal, raag, scriptures, dance text etc as well as appreciating the next layer of this knowledge that is grounded.

In my understanding, these dance forms are sattvic (highest virtues) in nature. So, through practice one has to be a seeker of higher purpose. These forms should be practiced as Sadhana (spiritual discipline) for self-inquiry and self-growth to find meaning to who you are and the purpose of life. One should be adequately educated with the non-corporeal philosophies, understanding of body, mind, and spirit.

*Tantra (Technique & Instrument)-* Guruji says that ‘Tantra’ means how to say, how to play if it is an instrument, how to stand in a proper stance if it is dance, and how to sing if it is vocal music. One has to work hard to perfect the technique. In my understanding, for a dancer the body, mind and intellect act as an instrument-form of the medium to access formless - the ultimate truth/ highest state of consciousness. It is very important for a practitioner to see that the physical body is kept healthy and energetic with regular Yoga and Pranayama practice and healthy food habits. Mind is filled with Sattva (purest form) thoughts and intellect is used for those actions leading to self-upliftment.

*Vidya (Matter)-* Guruji says that Vidya is matter eg. different taals, ragas, gharanas specialty etc. Vidya that has been passed on from one generation to another by masters. For dancers, the material includes the body of ancient texts expressing the ideas of Oneness (Formless-advaita principles), dualities (Purush-Prakriti), three qualities

of the universe, 5 elements of the universe (Pancha Mahabhutas), Krishna's Raas leela (based on 3 gunas and 5 panchmahabhutas), concept of Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman, two access points to the divine- Krishna & Shiva, Transcendental sacred literature such as Jayadeva's Geet Govinda, Cosmic Shiva, Ecstasy – all are sacred matter (vidya) of Transcendental performing Arts of Indian Dance. This Vidya needs to be shared through the Guru Shishya Parampara (Master -Student relationship). This beautiful, sacred, and divine relationship is based more on spiritual aspects of being as there is no biological connect and so in the true sense it expresses the concept of ONENESS through Arts and enjoys the benefits of transcendence.

*Kala- (Aesthetic Experience):* Guru ji says that the Dancer understands the Shastra, learns the technique using the matter to have the aesthetic experience. This experience cannot be explained or taught but the Guru does its samskara. All three are coming in from outside but Kala comes out from within in the form of persona, samskara, thoughts and beauty- exhibiting the quality of transformation. Here technique is completely erased and forgotten resulting into aesthetic beauty (Kala). The body is used to learn technique, intellect is used to understand Shastra and absorb vidya, mind is employed to develop the aesthetic experience to transcend to spiritual being.

The Art of Appreciation

I often wonder that we praise all the wonders of the world, the beauty of nature. Should we not praise our body, that is in fact a container of amazing treasures.

The last decade has been difficult for humans. So many disasters and unpredictable times- the largest pandemic of our time, earthquakes, floods, global warming, rise in sea levels, melting of icebergs, nuclear war threats, humanness in general is increasing. Somewhere we have misused natural resources due to increases in the sense of greed for the material world and total ignorance in understanding the fundamental Truth of Existence and the meaning of Life.

All these disasters are a pointer towards one thing that there is something more to this world of appearance- that which can never be created or destroyed so needs to be preserved. It is definitely made humans, especially the younger generation, curious about spiritual dimensions. India has a very big role to play in this decade not only in the economic field but also from the point of view of spiritual awakening and understanding. Spiritual means in a way striking a balance between both material world and Life within, while looking at their source. India has rich spiritual traditions in many areas including Yoga, Classical Dance, Literature, Music, Theatre, philosophy, where the world has always shown the faith, respect, and curiosity.

In today's time, Classical Indian Dance having multiple layers of quality such as transcendence, spiritual, humanity and sense of inclusiveness has an important place, a vital role to play in creating a sense of unity and addressing spiraling mental health issues through culture. We live in a time where the World Health Organization suggests that 280 million people are experiencing depression as we speak. This is just one example of the challenges of our time that I contend the Classical Arts Forms of India have a pivotal role in addressing.

I would say, Indian Classical Arts and heritage are one of the leading cultures around the world to have so much focus on spiritual dimensions and psychological prosperity designed to educate, entertain, and enlighten. In the book 'Yoga, From India to the West' the author Alistair Shearer also described how this form, originating in India, has fueled over a \$25 billion a year wellness industry with seekers looking to Indian originated traditions as a source of wellness intervention for both prevention and cure of physical and psychological issues. This emphasizes my point, and that of several people before me, that Indian Classical Arts and traditions on which they are based has a powerful role to play now and in future for the world's wellbeing. The Dance Arts are designed to shine our divinity that we all carry within, lead us to the aspect of transcendence by pulling us out of ignorance, confusion, failure with the touch of this divinity, transforming one in a beautiful human being. A source of positivity to the world.

## FINAL COMMENTS

Overall, there are questions that stem from considering the way in which learning, and development happens in the Classical Arts originating from India which I have outlined above. Can the artistic journey transition from being around the self to a selfless endeavor? How can we reach out more to make the experience of a selected few, more mainstream to impact the everyday experience of the general population amongst the communities we serve? To chisel the skill of an artist takes the same amount of time, sometimes even more, compared to other vocations. These qualities gained through years and years of training are unique and have great potential. How can the artists' minds be employed to aid other professions? Generally, we box in our options as artists to performance, choreography, and teaching. Sometimes we try dance criticism, and allied fields. But the artistic capability can be applied to apparently unconnected professions too. Art is about reaching out, erasing borders and these inherent elements can be applied to other areas of life too. Yet are the skills of artists considered akin to say a medical doctor? Given the power that when channeled correctly our skill set can have for humanity, does the worldwide education system, right from the start, place enough emphasis on using the power of arts to impart core life skills amongst our generations to come to make them approach life with a new level of resilience? A safe haven for times that are hard. Is art thought of as an elite commodity or a tool for self-growth amongst most communities? Do we consider artistic intelligence to be a quality worth pursuing just as intelligence in other domains? I conclude by asking the reader, the audience to think critically about all that Indian Classical Arts-

Dance and Music have achieved, and to think boldly about what they could achieve with further recognition and investment for fueling transcendence in society.

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