



BHARATNATYAM: A MENTAL AND PHYSICAL FITNESS TOOL FROM LEARNING TO TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Bharatnatyam goes beyond being a classical Indian dance. It's an art that brings together learning, self-growth, and well-being. This study dissects that journey, tracing how dancers grow. Right from students to teachers, the study is deep-rooted within the traditions of the *guru-shishya parampara* and the ancient wisdom of the *Natya Sastra*. Looking closely at everyday practice, the paper focuses on real-life training—posture, rhythm, *adavus*, *mudras*, *abhinaya*—and shows how this shape not just the body, but the mind and emotions, too. Dancers build physical strength and alignment, sharpen their focus, learn to handle emotions, and find new ways to express themselves. It's a holistic, culture-rich way to develop as a person, together with the body, mind, and self-awareness. In the end, the study highlights how Bharatnatyam stays important for teaching and as well as healing.

Key Words: Bharatnatyam, *Guru-Shishya Parampara*, Physical fitness, mental well-being, cognitive learning, emotional regulation.

INTRODUCTION

Bharatnatyam is one of the major classical dance traditions of India, rooted in Tamil Nadu and dating back nearly 2000 years. Its foundations are described in classical treatises such as the *Natya Sastra* of Bharata Muni and the *Abhinaya Darpana* of Nandikeshwara, which established dance as a highly codified, systematic, and refined art form. According to traditional belief, dance originated as a divine creation of Lord Brahma to guide humanity away from negative tendencies and restore moral and emotional balance. In the *Natya Sastra*, Bharata Muni (200 BCE-200 CE) describes the condition of the world in the *Treta Yuga* as follows:

“Graamyadharmapravrtte tu kaamalobhavasam gate |
Irsyaakrodhaadisammudhe loke sukhitaduhkhite || 9 ||

(Bharata, 2024)”

MEANING

Moved by this condition, Lord Indra, *Gandharvas* and the demi Gods approached Lord Brahma, who created *Natya Veda*, the fifth *Veda*, by drawing *paathya* (words) from the *Rigveda*, *abhinaya* (gestures) from the

Yajurveda, *geet* (Music) from the *Samaveda*, and *rasa* (emotions) from the *Atharvaveda* (Sinha, 2006). Thus, dance was conceived not merely as entertainment, but as a medium of knowledge, moral upliftment, and inner healing.

Historically associated with temple traditions and forms such as *sadir* or *dasi attam*, Bharatnatyam was officially recognized as a classical dance form by the Government of India in 1952. It may be understood as a holistic pathway from learner to teacher, as its training nurtures physical discipline, mental focus, emotional expression, and cultural-spiritual awareness. The *guru-shishya parampara* constitutes the oldest and most foundational pedagogical framework for the transmission of Bharatnatyam dance, with its roots often traced to the *Vedic* cultural tradition of India. In the contemporary context, Bharatnatyam deserves to be understood as an embodied and transformative practice that can foster emotional equilibrium, inner peace, and overall well-being.

Review of Literature : The present study draws upon a range of books, articles, journals, and websites to examine Bharatnatyam as a holistic pedagogic and therapeutic practice. Bharatnatyam offers an integrated learning process rooted in the principles of the *Natya Sastra* and enriched through temple and royal traditions (Bharat Muni, 1951/1961). Literature on Bharatnatyam pedagogy shows that learning within the *guru-shishya parampara* is primarily experiential and embodied. Chatterjea (1996) emphasizes repetition, discipline, and bodily practice in Indian classical dance training, while Prickett (2007) highlights close teacher-disciple transmission through demonstration, imitation, and long-term immersion. Meduri (2004) further observes that Bharatnatyam pedagogy remains deeply grounded in embodied practice even in its globalized form. Recent studies by Iyengar (2025) and Ganesh *et al.* (2025) also suggest that Bharatnatyam supports bodily awareness, emotional well-being, and holistic development.

Earlier scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy (1956) and Kapila Vatsyayan (2007) emphasized the psychological and philosophical significance of

Indian classical dance in integrating *bhava* (emotion) and *rasa* (aesthetic experience).

Chace (1975), a pioneer of dance movement therapy, argued that movement can express feelings beyond words, while Hanna (2015) viewed dance as a communicative language that contributes to mental and emotional health. Sarashetti (2024) notes that Bharatnatyam pedagogy extends beyond technique to cultivate emotional sensitivity, aesthetic refinement, self-discipline, and spiritual awareness in an analysis of benefits.

In relation to cognition and embodiment, Gallese and Freedberg (2007) showed that the movement of the artistic body may activate mirror neurons, thereby fostering empathy and emotional understanding in the observer. In a critical analysis of health benefits of Bharatnatyam, Wasnik *et al.* (2023) reviewed the physiological advantages with the contemporary wellness paradigm.

The technical foundation of Bharatnatyam rests on *adavus*, with *araimandi* as a central semi-seated posture that provides stability, balance, and range of movement (Mohan and Narayanan, 2022). In Bharatnatyam, emotion is both inwardly experienced as *rasa* and outwardly communicated through *bhava*, enabling a meaningful exchange between performer and spectator that may enhance empathy and emotional intelligence. Sustained engagement in dance has also been linked with improved self-esteem, mindfulness, and positive effects (Koch *et al.*, 2019). Pathloth (2020) further identifies the therapeutic value of *hasta mudras* and concludes that *Hasta Mudra Therapy* can be an effective component of dance therapy. Thus, education in Bharatnatyam emerges as a holistic journey in which physical expression, intellectual understanding, emotional depth, and inner transformation are cultivated together (Iyengar, 2025).

Taken together, the literature indicates that Bharatnatyam is not merely a performative art form, but a holistic pedagogic pathway through which the learner gradually develops into a teacher while cultivating mental resilience, physical discipline, emotional balance, and self-awareness.

Research Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive research, experiential learning and interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology to examine Bharatnatyam as a holistic pathway from learners to teachers for mental and physical fitness. As a dancer-scholar, the author combines theoretical inquiry with scientific insight into the physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of Bharatnatyam performance. It is a Narrative Literature Review primarily based on relevant texts. The study also draws upon reflective understanding of Bharatnatyam as an embodied practice that integrates physical discipline, mental focus, emotional expression, and cultural-spiritual values. Rather than following a clinical or experimental design, the research uses an analytical and descriptive approach to interpret how long-term training in Bharatnatyam contributes to the development of fitness, self-awareness, emotional balance, and the gradual transformation from learner to teacher.

DISCUSSION

Bharatnatyam promotes physical fitness while also nurturing culture, storytelling, emotional resonance, and graceful movement, thereby supporting holistic wellness (Sabaanath and Thevanthy, 2015). Its training is rooted in long-term guided practice, lineage-based transmission, and an immersive pedagogic environment in which learning becomes embodied through repetition and muscle memory (Chatterjea, 1996). In the *guru-shishya parampara*, knowledge is transmitted not only through verbal instruction but also through observation, imitation, and sustained bodily practice. Such disciplined learning helps the student internalize the nuances of dance and gradually develop expressive and emotional maturity. As students grow, Bharatnatyam training also supports better emotional expression and reduced stress.

Training begins with *adavus*, the foundational movements that develop rhythm, posture, stamina, and coordination. With sustained practice, learners progress to advanced repertoire such as *alarippu*, *varnam*, *thillana*, and *padams*. This training reflects the *Natya Sastra* principle of the integration of body,

mind, and emotion:

“*Yato hastastato drishtiryato drishtistato manah I
Yato manastato bhavo yato bhavastato rasah II*”

(Where the hand goes, the eyes follow; where the eyes go, the mind follows; where the mind goes, expression arises; and where expression arises, *rasa* is experienced) (Bharata, 2024).

This integrated principle helps reduce stress through posture, rhythmic repetition, symbolic gesture, and emotional expression.

Postures help because body alignment changes stress response.

Body posture has a direct influence on emotional state. A slumped posture is associated with negative mood and greater fear under stress (Nair *et al.*, 2015).

In Bharatnatyam, postures such as *araimandi*, a lifted chest, an elongated spine, and grounded legs promote bodily stability, alertness, and emotional regulation. Through the *taalam* of the guru's cymbals or *nattuvangam*, the students are able to maintain stringent postures, helping with an improved mood, a higher self-esteem, and lower fear responses. The guru corrects alignment faults and co-regulate the student's physical tension.

Steps help because repeated rhythmic movement regulates attention, memory, and the stress response

Adavus and repeated step patterns combine rhythm, movement, attention, memory, and repetition. Practising a basic *adavu* with *tala* and *sollukattu* anchors attention to beat, sequence, and bodily timing, shifting the mind away from scattered thoughts and rumination. This movement from mental distraction to structured sensorimotor focus may explain why disciplined dance practice becomes calming over time. Supporting this view, a meta-analysis of 41 controlled studies found that dance movement therapy and dance interventions reduce anxiety and depression and improve quality of life (Koch *et al.*, 2019).

Regular practice also improves pulmonary and circulatory efficiency, which are important for oxygen exchange and overall respiratory health (Ananth, 2018). The constant practice *guru* puts the learners under, brings out this improvement.

While continuous practice often leaves the learners bored, the *guru* must intervene and provide renewed interest in dance through application of the dance, thus, helping them resolve internal stress.

Hand mudras help because they turn emotion into precise symbolic action.

Before the development of spoken language, humans expressed ideas and emotions through bodily movement and gesture. In Indian classical dance, hasta mudras serve as a refined language of expression. The five fingers are traditionally associated with the five elements—*Agni* (fire), *Vaayu* (air), *Aakaash* (space), *Prithvi* (earth), and *Jal* (water). Texts such as the *Natya Sastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, and *Nrityaratnaavali* provide the basis for this gestural vocabulary. Each mudra carries symbolic meaning and adds depth to the dancer's expression, while also fostering concentration, meditative awareness, and a sense of spiritual connection (Kumar and Kumari, 2017).

Mondal (2020) argue that specific *mudras* may also have therapeutic value: *Hamsasya* is linked to memory, focus, and sleep quality; *Mayura* resembles *Prithvi Mudra* and is associated with skin health and nourishment; *Trishula* aligns with *Varun Mudra* and is linked to water balance and muscle relief; *Simhamukha* corresponds with *Apana Mudra* and is associated with regulating diabetes and digestive issues; and *Kartarimukha* aligns with *Prana Mudra*, which may help reduce fatigue, improve immunity, and support vision. However, it's important to note that scientific researches have yet to validate these clinical links. Recent research further suggests that Bharatnatyam hand gestures communicate with precision and emotional depth, and that meaningful symbolic gestures capture attention and carry emotional salience (Iyenger, 2025). Thus, *mudras* help the dancer focus the mind and organize meaning; with choreographies and emotional direction of the *gurus* helping externalize feelings in a structured manner.

Facial expression helps in emotional release during *abhinaya*

Bharatnatyam relies on facial expression, gesture, and movement to communicate narrative and

emotion. Therefore, *abhinaya* is important not only artistically but also psychologically. In forms such as *padam* and *varnam*, the dancer expresses devotion, longing, sorrow, courage, or tenderness through *mukha-abhinaya*. This process enables controlled emotional articulation and resembles guided emotional processing rather than emotional overload. Research on emotion regulation suggests that suppression of expression is associated with greater stress-related symptoms, while facial-feedback studies indicate that valid emotional expressions can influence emotional experience and autonomic response (Ganesh *et al.*, 2025).

The *Gurus* guide the learner through creative storytelling to tap into universal aesthetic archetypes (*rasas*). The teacher provides a safe cultural and artistic framework, training the student how to step fully into intense emotional characters and safely step back out of them, ensuring balanced psychological development.

Beyond these mechanisms, dance is widely regarded as an effective medium through which children and adolescents can express emotions, build confidence, improve social interaction, and develop self-discipline and spirituality. Since emotional difficulties are often held in the body through tension and restricted movement, Bharatnatyam offers a means of release and regulation. In addition, Ho *et al.* (2018) found that among breast cancer patients with higher initial distress, dance movement therapy was associated with a more favorable blood flow pattern after intervention.

Bharatnatyam's therapeutic value is also reflected in findings that dance participation can improve functional capability in older women, enhance emotional well-being in adolescent girls, reduce fall risk in healthy older adults, and improve balance in women over 60 (Sheppard and Broughton, 2020). Physiologists recognize Bharatnatyam as a healing practice that supports a balanced lifestyle across physical, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions (Ananth, 2018). Regular practice positively influences physical wellness and has been used therapeutically in educational and medical settings (Ananth, 2018; Chatterjee, 2013).

Bharatnatyam also develops coordination, kinesthetic awareness, rhythm, and spatial awareness (Ananth, 2018). It may also boost serotonin and endorphin levels, thereby promoting happiness and emotional release (Gurusathya, 2019).

Thus, Bharatnatyam helps reduce stress by improving posture, channeling attention into rhythm, transforming vague feelings into meaningful gestures, and reducing emotional suppression through sustained embodied practice.

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that Bharatnatyam is far more than a classical dance form; it is a holistic and transformative pathway that guides the individual to learn through the integrated development of body, mind, and inner self. Rooted in the *guru-shishya parampara* and supported by the principles of the *Natya Sastra*, Bharatnatyam cultivates physical fitness, mental focus, emotional balance, self-discipline, and expressive maturity through sustained and embodied practice. Its structured training in posture, rhythm, mudras, facial expression, and performance not only strengthens the body but also promotes stress reduction, self-awareness, and psychological well-being. The study further indicates that Bharatnatyam serves as a culturally grounded and non-clinical medium of holistic wellness, where artistic discipline becomes a means of emotional regulation, physical endurance, and spiritual refinement. Thus, Bharatnatyam may be understood as a meaningful pedagogic and therapeutic tradition that nurtures the learner into a balanced, resilient, and value-oriented teacher.

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