

# INCORPORATING INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE (MOHINIYATTAM AND KATHAK) IN SPECIAL EDUCATION CURRICULA TO PROMOTE EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** This research investigates the integration of Indian classical dance forms, specifically Mohiniyattam and Kathak, within special education curricula to enhance emotional expression, communication, and social interaction for children with special needs. Renowned for their intricate movements, rhythmic patterns, and expressive storytelling, these dance forms provide a unique medium to improve non-verbal communication, often challenging for children with developmental disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). The study examines both the therapeutic and educational advantages of these dance forms, illuminating their roles in fostering emotional intelligence, social skills, and cognitive development. Utilizing qualitative research methods including case studies, interviews, and direct observations within special education settings—this research highlights the positive impact of incorporating Mohiniyattam and Kathak on emotional expression and cognitive processes like attention and memory. Furthermore, the potential of dance as a non-verbal communication channel is explored, revealing how it facilitates connections among peers, educators, and therapists. The findings advocate for a holistic approach to addressing the unique challenges faced by children with special needs, promoting an inclusive environment that nurtures creativity, expression, and connection. Overall, this research underscores the value of integrating Indian classical dance as a transformative tool for enhancing emotional, social, and cognitive development in special education.

**Keywords:** Indian classical dance, special education, emotional expression, communication, mohiniyattam, kathak, therapeutic dance, non-verbal communication, autism, ADHD, down syndrome.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the incorporation of artistic expressions into education—particularly in special education contexts—has gained significant attention. Among these artistic mediums, Indian classical dance forms such as Mohiniyattam and Kathak exemplify a unique capacity to articulate emotions and narratives through movement, rhythm, and facial expressions. These ancient dance styles, deeply embedded in Indian culture, not only deliver aesthetic experiences but also serve as powerful mechanisms for enhancing emotional expression and communication skills, particularly for neuro-divergent learners. (Sing, Alghare, Sonber, Deshmukh, 2025) Classical dance styles like Bharatanatyam Mohiniyattam, Kathak, and Manipuri focus on telling stories through body language and facial expressions. This can help with stress relief, emotional regulation, and practicing mindfulness. Furthermore, Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) incorporates components such as abhinaya and

mudras to address various psychological conditions, including anxiety, depression, and autism spectrum disorders.

Empirical research findings highlight the efficacy of Indian dance in fostering self-esteem, mitigating stress levels, and elevating both emotional and cognitive well-being. This paper explores the effective incorporation of these classical dance forms in transforming special education curricula, enabling students to navigate their emotions while improving their communication skills. It also delves into the historical significance of these art forms, pedagogical benefits in promoting emotional wellbeing, and practical strategies for classroom implementation. Through comprehensive analysis, this discourse aims to highlight the critical necessity of integrating Indian classical dance as a dynamic approach to enriching educational experiences for students with special needs.

(Bzhinaev, Bénier, 2023) The dance Kathak originates from the state of Uttar Pradesh. It is the only dance in which there is a fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultures. The distinctive feature of Kathak is its brilliant footwork and steady movement with a fast tempo that adds to the beauty and grace. The typical Kathak costume resembles Mughal miniature paintings. Dances, whether traditional or classical, have beneficial effects on the mental, intellectual and social development of children. Indeed, in addition to connecting them to others, dances foster in children a full awareness of their existence and link them to a whole system of cultural values and principles that they might otherwise avoid.

(Menon, 2011) It also revealed that the learning and practice of Mohiniyattam is having a positive impact on the psycho neuro immunological system of women. By involving age old women in small groups with the slogan ‘CATCH them Old’, even provides cure for certain physical ailments in old age such as high blood pressure, mental depression, arthritis, asthma etc. Learning of art forms can have even positive effect on memory, intelligence and emotional status.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the therapeutic benefits of social skills among children with special needs.
2. To evaluate the depth of emotional, cognitive development exhibited by children with special needs.
3. To explore the educational benefits of incorporating Mohiniyattam and Kathak dance forms into the development of these children.

## LITERATURE REVIEW & GAP ANALYSIS

The therapeutic employment of dance within special education has been extensively documented, with numerous studies corroborating the enhancement of communication and emotional expression through movement. (Gruen, 2018) affirmed that dance therapy significantly improves social and emotional skills in children with autism by providing a vital outlet for non-verbal communication. Notably, Indian classical dance forms, particularly Mohiniyattam and Kathak, are distinctive for their focus on facial expressions, hand gestures (mudras), and body movements, which are essential for storytelling and emotional expression. In their exploration of dance therapy for children with ASD, (Karkou, P Sanderson, 2006) identified that the structured and expressive nature of dance enhances focus, social interactions, and emotional recognition. Similarly, (Vishwakarma, 2022) investigated how rhythmic patterns in Kathak amplify emotional engagement and sensory integration for children facing learning disabilities. Kathak dance originated in northern India and characterised by its unique speedy footwork (tatkar), hand gestures (hasta-mudra), and graceful circular spins (chakkars), the Indian classical dance form Kathak has turned therapeutic with due course of time by implementing its

movements for healing purposes. Mohiniyattam, characterized by its fluid motions, emphasizes emotional expression through gentle, evocative gestures, while Kathak, known for its rapid spins and intricate footwork, enhances coordination, focus, and memory. Both dance forms provide unique advantages when integrated into special education, and a nuanced understanding of their specific contributions is crucial for developing targeted therapeutic interventions. Despite the existing literature, there is a notable gap concerning the specific methodologies used in implementing these dance forms within educational frameworks designed for children with special needs.

### Methodology

This research employs qualitative data collection techniques. The study occurred in special education classrooms, focusing on children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Down syndrome, and ADHD.

#### 1. Sample Population

The sample includes 58 children aged 10 years and above with developmental disabilities who participated in a 12-week dance intervention program incorporating Mohiniyattam and Kathak at “Krisna Performing Arts” in Thrissur, Kerala, India.

#### 2. Data Collection Methods

- ❖ **Observational Studies:** The children's behaviors during dance sessions were systematically observed and recorded, focusing on engagement, emotional expression, and communication patterns.
- ❖ **Interviews and Focus Groups:** Teachers, therapists, and parents were interviewed to gather qualitative feedback regarding the children's progression and experiences.
- ❖ **Participant Journals:** Educators maintained daily journals to track students' participation and progress in emotional expression and communication.

#### 3. Data Analysis

Qualitative data derived from interviews and observations were thematically analysed to identify prevalent patterns in children's development.

### RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The study elucidated significant advancements in emotional expression and communication among the participating children. Key findings include:

Children exhibited enhanced emotional expression through dance, particularly via facial expressions and the fourfold acting technique known as “The chaturvidha abhinaya,” along with hand gestures termed as “Hasta mudras.” This improvement was notably pronounced in children with ASD, who demonstrated heightened comfort in non-verbal emotional expression utilizing the chaturvidha abhinaya and hasta mudras. Social interactions among students improved substantially. Children initially non-verbal or experiencing communication difficulties successfully engaged with peers through synchronized movements and cooperative dance activities, incorporating warming-up exercises, adavus (basic steps of Mohiniyattam), and Hastaks from Kathak. The structured movements and rhythmic patterns inherent in Mohiniyattam and Kathak contributed to improved attention span and instruction-following abilities for children with ADHD. Educators reported a decrease in fidgeting and distractions during lessons. Improvements were noted in memory recall, attention to detail, and spatial awareness, especially emphasized through Kathak's footwork and rhythmic patterns, which necessitated children's focus on multiple simultaneous elements. Interviews with educators and parents revealed

that engagement in dance positively influenced children's confidence, self-expression, and emotional regulation. Parents noted enhanced emotional stability and social skills within the home environment.

Feedback from parents:

Mrs. Sukanya Menon (Mother of Aarati Menon, 12 years old, diagnosed with ADHD) states that Aarati was diagnosed with ADHD when she was about five. She's very energetic and creative, but she always had trouble sitting still, focusing, and following instructions. We were looking for something that would channel her energy positively. When I heard about the dance class/therapy sessions using Mohiniyattam and Kathak, I was curious—it felt like a unique opportunity. In the beginning, she was restless. She'd get distracted or want to run around. But by the third or fourth week, we noticed something shift. She started waiting for class time. She talked about the steps, the teacher, even the music. For a child who struggles with attention, that was huge. The structure and rhythm of dance really helped her focus.

Mrs. Lakshmi Nair (Mother of Meera Nair, 15 years old, diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder) says that Meera was diagnosed with autism when she was three. She's mostly non-verbal, and for a long time, she found it hard to connect with people or respond to social cues. She was also very sensitive to sound and movement. When I heard about this program, I wasn't sure how she would respond to the music and structured activity, but I wanted to try something creative that might help with her emotional expression. The first couple of weeks were challenging. She didn't want to step into the hall, and she covered her ears when the music started. But the instructors were so patient. They let her just sit and watch at first. Slowly, she began tapping her feet or swaying when the music played. By the fifth week, she actually started joining the group, mimicking hand gestures and facial expressions. I didn't expect classical dance is something so structured to work for a child like Meera, but it actually gave her a safe, predictable rhythm to explore herself. It helped her find her own kind of expression. I think programs like this should be available in more schools and therapy centres.

Mrs. Revathi Pillai (Mother of Dev Pillai, 10 years old, diagnosed with Down syndrome) said that Dev is a cheerful and affectionate child, but he has always faced challenges with coordination, speech, and social interaction. When I heard about this classical dance program, I was curious because Dev loves music. I thought this might be a fun way to help him build confidence and improve his motor skills. At first, he was more interested in watching others than participating. He would smile and clap, but he didn't want to move much. But the environment was so welcoming and non-judgmental. The instructors gently encouraged him, and by the third week, he was dancing well, trying to dance—along with the group. Now, he even insists on wearing his practice costume at home! One major change is in his coordination and balance. Earlier, he had difficulty following multi-step movements or maintaining rhythm. Now, he can follow simple sequences, and he's more confident in how he moves. His speech has also improved slightly—he's using more words and gestures when describing his dance class. The biggest change is in his mood. He seems happier, more focused, and calmer after dance days.

## **SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM DANCE EDUCATORS**

### **1. Ms. Reshmi Kurup**

Founder, Natyadarpana School of Arts | Indian Classical Dance Educator

Ms. Reshmi Kurup, Indian Classical Dance educator and founder of Natyadarpana School of Arts in Cochin, Kerala, shares that teaching a gentle 12-year-old autistic student helped her realize how classical dance, when approached with patience and care, can be a powerful tool for self-expression and growth. She emphasizes respecting each child's unique pace, encouraging independence by limiting parental interference, and focusing on positive reinforcement rather than frequent corrections. Using repetition, visual cues, and familiar routines

helps build confidence, while a calm, nurturing environment supports emotional safety. Ms. Kurup highlights the importance of celebrating small milestones, as they lay the foundation for meaningful progress in the dance journey.

## 2. Ms. Kareesha Sandeep

MPhil in Indian Classical Dance from Mahatma Gandhi University and founder of Nrityasree Dance Academy in Malappuram, Kerala

According to Ms. Sandeep Indian classical dance can greatly benefit children with ADHD when approached with understanding and structure. She suggests using short, focused lessons with clear visual and verbal cues, incorporating rhythm and music early to hold attention, and avoiding over-correction to maintain motivation. Breaking classes into small segments, allowing expressive movement, and channelling energy positively through dynamic steps can help children stay engaged. She also recommends collaborating with parents to establish a simple, consistent home practice routine. With patience and empathy, dance can help children with ADHD build focus, confidence, and emotional expression.

3. According to Ms. Sangeetha K. Warriar, a Post Graduate in Bharatanatyam dance and a school educator in English and Environmental Studies subject in Calicut, Kerala, believes that Indian classical dance can be deeply beneficial for children with Down syndrome when taught with empathy and structured guidance. Drawing from her experience as both a dancer and teacher, she emphasizes the importance of using gentle repetition, clear visual demonstrations, and a slow, steady pace to support motor coordination and memory. She encourages creating a joyful, pressure-free learning environment that focuses on movement, rhythm, and expressive storytelling rather than technical perfection. According to her, positive reinforcement and celebrating small achievements help build confidence, while incorporating simple rhythms and songs enhances both engagement and cognitive development. Ms. Warriar highlights that with patience, consistency, and emotional warmth, Indian classical dance can nurture not only artistic skills but also the self-esteem and social connection of children with Down syndrome.

From researcher's perspective it will prove very beneficial if we incorporate structured dance programs, including Mohiniyattam and Kathak, into daily curricula, facilitating creative expression and emotional development among children with special needs. Development of professional training for educators and therapists to equip them with the necessary skills to effectively implement dance therapy in diverse educational settings. Further research should explore long-term benefits of dance integration and broader inclusion of various Indian classical dance forms in addressing the diverse needs of children with special needs. Incorporating structured Indian classical dance programs, such as Mohiniyattam and Kathak, into the daily curriculum for children with special needs presents a transformative opportunity to enhance not only their emotional and communicative abilities but also their overall sense of identity and well-being. These dance forms, with their emphasis on storytelling, rhythm, and expressive movement, can offer unique avenues for children with developmental disabilities to connect with their bodies and emotions in a culturally enriching context. Embedding dance therapy as a regular part of special education curricula could foster routine, self-discipline, and joy—elements that are especially crucial for students who often face sensory and social challenges.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The study adhered to ethical research practices, ensuring informed consent from all participants and maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process.

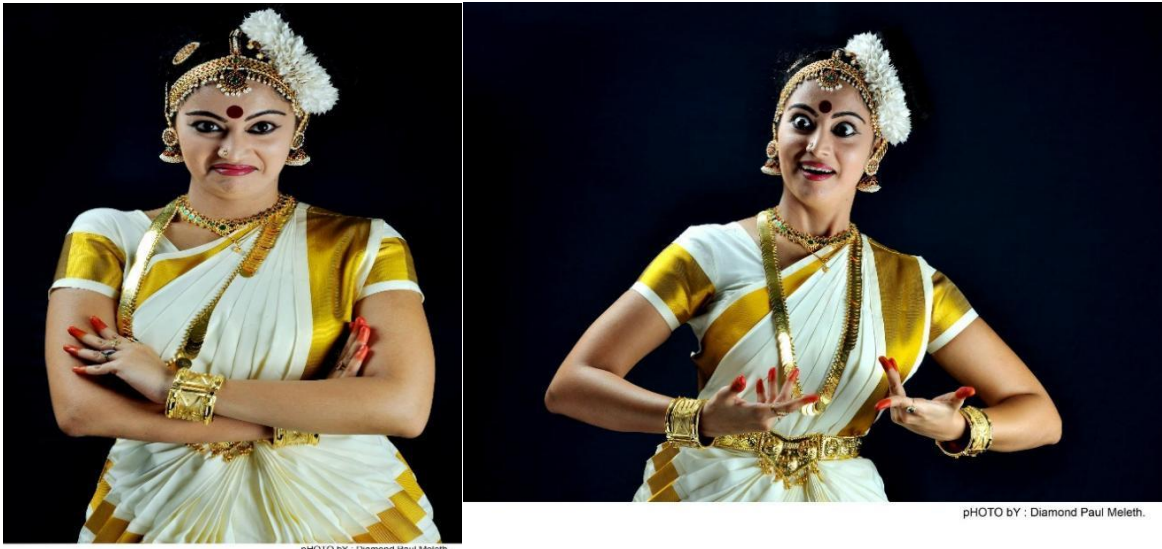
## CONCLUSION

This research underscores the transformative potential of Indian classical dance specifically Mohiniyattam and Kathak as an innovative and culturally rooted tool for enhancing emotional expression, communication, and cognitive development in children with special needs. Through structured integration into special education curricula, these dance forms have proven effective in bridging communication gaps, especially for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, and ADHD. The qualitative data gathered from observations, interviews indicate substantial improvements in emotional regulation, social engagement, motor coordination, and attention span among participants. The expressive techniques inherent in these dance styles such as abhinaya, mudras, rhythmic footwork, and storytelling offer children with developmental disabilities a safe and structured outlet for self-expression. In doing so, these dance forms foster a sense of identity, confidence, and community connection, while also nurturing cognitive and emotional resilience.

## Notes

### ➤ **Mohiniyattam Techniques for Emotional Expression:**

1. **Abhinaya:** This technique involves expressive acting where dancers convey emotions and stories through facial expressions and body movements. Indian classical dancers employ different facial expression changes and gestures to show varied moods.
2. **Mudras:** Hand gestures in Mohiniyattam, known as mudras, hold specific meanings and are integral to storytelling. By performing various mudras, dancers can represent emotions and narratives, allowing for a nuanced portrayal of characters, including divine figures or human emotions.
3. **Lasya Style:** The dance form is characterized by its emphasis on the feminine aspect of dance, known as lasya. This style focuses on gentle and fluid movements that evoke emotions such as love, devotion, and longing.
4. **Choreographic Structures:** Mohiniyattam employs structured dance sequences where rhythmic patterns and emotional expressions are interwoven. Performances often include storytelling elements that enhance emotional engagement, making it a powerful medium for expressing feelings through movement.
5. **Costumes and Music:** The traditional white and gold attire and the accompanying Carnatic music also enhance emotional expression. The visual aspects and rhythmic melodies complement the dancer's movements and help convey emotional depth during performances.



➤ **Kathak Techniques for Emotional Expression:**

1. **Abhinaya:** Abhinaya in Kathak encompasses a broad spectrum of emotional expression, integrating facial expressions, hand gestures, and body movements to convey narratives ranging from love to tragedy.
2. **Mudras:** Kathak dancers use various mudras to symbolize characters and emotions within stories. These gestures are not merely decorative but serve as a language that conveys the essence of the narrative, enhancing emotional clarity.
3. **Nritta and Nritya:** Kathak dance combines nritta (pure dance) and nritya (expressive storytelling techniques). This combination allows dancers to showcase technical brilliance through complex footwork while also engaging in emotive storytelling through gestures and expressions.
4. **Chakkars (The Spins):** The rapid spins known as chakkars are not only technically demanding but also imbued with emotional significance, symbolizing feelings like excitement or turmoil.
5. **Musicality and Rhythm:** Kathak maintains a dynamic relationship with music, particularly Hindustani classical music. The interplay between rhythms and emotions, where dancers synchronize their movements with musical phrases, enhances the emotional expression throughout performances.
6. **Eye Expressions:** Eyes are critical in Kathak performances, often regarded as the window to the soul. Dancers skilfully use their eyes to communicate feelings, enhancing the narrative without words.



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