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Dance As A Path To Spiritual Awakening: A Phenomenological Inquiry Into The Lived Experiences Of Indian Classical Dancers

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Abstract

The Hindu philosophy prescribes numerous paths for a seeker in his/her journey towards spiritual awakening. One may embark on anyone or multiple paths such as Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, Hatha Yoga and Kundalini Yoga in the journey towards spiritual awakening. The Vedas and Upanishads are the foundational texts that lay down the practises and rituals to be followed in the spiritual journey. The process of spiritual awakening leads to a deeper insight into the nature of self and reality. The ultimate goal is to transcend the ego through self-enquiry, self-improvement and self-mastery and in the process experience oneness with the divine. This paper explores art with specific reference to Indian Classical Dance and Dancers as a path towards the journey of spiritual awakening. The Natyashastra (NS) written by Bharat Muni and referred to as the fifth Veda is the foundation text for Natya. It is the sacred guidebook that stands as a preamble to the Indian classical dance fraternity for generations. One of the purposes of the Natyashastra is to enhance the spiritual enrichment of the dancer in his/her understanding of the aesthetics, ethics and the human experience. This research paper is a phenomenological inquiry that probes into the existential and spiritual metamorphoses undergone by practitioners of Indian classical dance. It elucidates the dancer's capacity to catalyse profound spiritual awakenings. The researcher, through an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of classical dancers, seeks to illuminate the mechanisms by which dance facilitates introspection, personal growth, and self-actualization. A qualitative research design has been adopted comprising in-depth interviews, narrative surveys, and observational methods. This paper probes the dialectical relationships between espoused theories, practical applications, and interpersonal dynamics within the dance community. The emergent findings underscore the transformative potential of dance to reconfigure belief systems, practices, perceptual frameworks, and relational dynamics, thereby cultivating heightened self-awareness and spiritual consciousness among dancers.

Key words: Espoused theory, Hindu philosophy, Indian classical dance, Phenomenology, Spiritual awakening, Spiritual experiences, Transformation.

Introduction

The purpose of life as stated across all faiths is deeply embedded in spiritual wisdom, duty and self-realisation. The only purpose of human existence is realisation of one's own nature, which is divine. Swami Vivekanand coined the term "eternal religion" when he addressed the parliament of world religion in Chicago in 1893. Which literally means the "Eternal or Universal Truth" (Kumar, 2006). The 'Universal truth' that explains the deeper and eternal dimension of life and human existence. The truth that sets us to transcend beyond the physical, mental and material world. It puts us on the path to realise, connect with and live our lives in alignment of the deeper truth. The key aspects of one's spiritual journey is to experience the divine essence within and discover the truth within us. All spiritual thinkers have preached about awakening this inner wisdom. The objective is to awaken the energy within us and experience the ultimate truth.

The underlying concept of the Hindu philosophy focuses on Dharma, Karma, Moksha, Atman and Brahman. The Vedas and Upanishads, the foundational text, have outlined numerous rituals and practices that lead one on the path of spiritual awakening. These rituals and practices lead the individual on the part of understanding the nature of self and reality.

Art has been explained as a creation by an individual who brings to life in a visual form using his / her skills and imagination based on the individual's thoughts, emotions, beliefs and ideas. It can convey the ideas and beliefs in a different form than using verbal expression. It is a creation that attempts to resonate with both the creator and the audience. Art has been an integral part of human civilization from ancient times. Art as a medium for spiritual expression touches upon the various facets of spirituality. It allows for self-expression, contemplation, display of abstract transcendental concepts in a concrete form and in the process seek a deep connection with something higher. The sacred scriptures, philosophical text, spiritual teachings that are a combination of rituals and worship provide inspiration and guidance to create artwork that provide fuel to self-realisation and search for meaning beyond the material world.

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan (1977) states, "the Hindu mind views the reactive process as a mean of suggesting or creating a vision however fleeting, of a Divine Truth, and regards art as a means of expressing a state of bliss akin to the absolute state of *anand* or *Jivamukti* (release of life)."

It is apt to state that Art and Spirituality as a phenomena is historically connected and holds a profound and significant essence to human existence. Each plays a pivotal role in revelation through experience. Art becomes the mode for spiritual awakening and spiritual awakening seeks its path from Art.

Rationale of the study

This research paper seeks to explore the spiritual awakening concept from an art perspective. It probes the existential and spiritual metamorphoses undergone by practitioners of Indian classical dance in seeking this ultimate truth of life. The rationale for selecting this topic for research study, has been prompted primarily by the researcher's personal observations, revelations and transformations experienced that the researcher espouses as spiritual awakening as a classical dancer of Kathak style.

The Natyashastra (NS) written by Bharat Muni and referred to as the Fifth Veda is the foundation text for *Natya*. It is the sacred guidebook that stands as a preamble to the Indian classical dance fraternity for generations. One of the purposes of the Natyashastra is to enhance the spiritual enrichment of the dancer in his/her understanding of the aesthetics, ethics and the human experience. The literature review highlighted in general the transformative power of dance from a health and spiritual point of view.

However, there is a dearth of research studies investigating the spiritual experiences of Indian classical dancers. Hence, the researcher undertook this study to gain insights in this regard to fill in the research gap so identified. Furthermore, spirituality is at the core of Indian culture, which itself justifies the selection of this topic having relevance in the present socio-cultural, psychological, and philosophical context of our nation.

Objectives of the study

1. To trace the historical association between the spirituality and Indian classical dance
2. To review the insights of historically senior classical dancers about spirituality and dance
3. To explore the perspectives of classical dancers regarding their spiritual awakening experiences
4. To suggest measures to strengthen spiritual awakening experiences of Indian classical dancers

Scope of the Study

This study aims to explore the phenomenon of spiritual awakening as experienced of Indian classical dancers. The study aims to cover dancers of all Indian classical dance form from Mumbai. The dance forms considered are Kathak, Bharatnatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, Manipuri, Kathakali, and. Sattriya. The study is conducted through in-depth one-on-one interviews with 10 senior Gurus of classical dance. The study aims to focus purely on the spiritual dimension of the art form.

Delimitations of the study

The study is delimited with reference to the geographical extent of the sample including the time for conduction of the study and the number of interviews conducted. These factors were beyond the control of the researcher. The research was conducted with classical dancers from Mumbai and Thane with the exception of three dancers from Goa, Coimbatore and Kolkata respectively. The scholar tried her best to connect with classical dancers of all forms. However, was unable to cover Kathakali and Kuchipudi dance style due to unavailability of dancers.

Review of related literature

This research explores the embodied spiritual awakening that an Indian classical dance experiences. We shall review the literature regarding the concept of spiritual awakening and the spiritual aspects of Indian classical dance. The section is thus sub-divided to review literature on the themes of spirituality, spiritual awakening and historic connection between Indian classical dance and spirituality.

1. Spirituality

Spirituality as a phenomenon has had its relevance since ancient civilisation. In the Indian context spirituality is referred to as *Adhyatma*, a Sanskrit word composed of two parts, *Adhi* + *Atma*. *Adhi* means pertaining to or above and *Atma* means self or soul (<https://whtype.com/2025/05/08/aadhyatma-kya-hai/>). In the global context spirituality is derived from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning breath. It is also related to the Greek *pneuma*, or breath, which refers to the vital spirit or soul (Leonard & Carlson, 2013).

According to a research paper published by Dyson et. al (1997) based on the literature review on “The Meaning of Spirituality” concludes that the working framework for the exploration of spirituality primarily consists of the self, others and ‘God’ and the relationship between them. Within this overall framework the emerging themes of meaning, hope, relatedness / connectedness, beliefs / belief systems and the expression of spirituality is articulated.

The current day spiritual thinker B K Shivani (Shivani, 2020) explains spirituality as, “Spirituality means a personality which is using the original qualities (purity, peace, love, and happiness) of the spirit in every

thought and action”. According to Sadguru (2014) of Isha Foundation, “Spiritual does not mean looking up or looking down or praying or going to the temple. ‘Spiritual’ essentially means you are in an experience which is beyond the limitations of the physical. That means you are in a boundless space. This longing is always there in every human being. Either you are approaching it in instalments, or you are consciously going for the Ultimate”. Swami Sarvapriyananda who belongs to the Ramakrishna order and part of the Vedanta Society explains, “Vedanta understands the spirituality as overcoming the ignorance about ourselves, a journey from ignorance to knowledge. From not knowing, not realizing, to knowing and realizing what I am, what this universe is, what is the point of all of this” (<https://www.sloww.co/swami-sarpapriyananda-quotes>).

One may conclude that ‘Spirituality’ is an abstract concept, a phenomenon. It is an experience that aims to seek the meaning of life and live a life of contentment and peace. It is a personalised experience. An experience that connotes the essence of spirituality.

2. Spiritual Awakening

Simply put, the transformative process that one goes through while on the spiritual path can be explained as “Spiritual awakening”. Spiritual awakening is a process, a path that the seeker takes in his/her exploration to finding the meaning of life. This aspect drives us to think of the higher life and how to live more perfectly in the spirit. The Vedas and Upanishads are the foundational texts that lay down the practises and rituals to be followed in the spiritual journey. According to the commentary of S. Radhakrishnan (1999), the aim of the Upanishads was to bring peace and freedom to the anxious human spirit. Hence, one may infer that self-realisation is at core of the Upanishads. The yogic practices of concentration, meditation, contemplation are the suggested practices that are instrumental in orienting the intangible realities of our life. The Upanishads support the inward journey, to becoming one with the Divine. It lays stress on the knowledge as the means for salvation. It insists on a life of spirit which combines both *Jnana* (soul sense) and *Karma* (selfless service).

Research studies have explored both the common core of phenomenological features that typify these mystical experiences, and their transformational effects. Their study reported the spiritual awakening as a mystical experience involving feelings of expansion (including conscious awareness leaving the body), energy rising up the spine, a sense of being enveloped in light, love or part of a unified energetic field. Principle triggers for these experiences included concentrating on spiritual matters, the presence of a spiritually developed person, and intense meditation or prayer. Transformational changes in participants included increased sensory sensitivity, creativity, and changes in beliefs, including a desire to serve others, a sense of unity with all, and the immortality of the spirit.

Another research by Stokke & Rodriguez (2021) titled, “Spiritual Awakening Experiences: A Phenomenological Study in Transpersonal Psychology”, examine four individual cases, obtained through qualitative in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced phenomena of peak experiences, kundalini awakening, heart opening, and dark nights. Their literature review captures the work of Grofs (1990) who define spiritual emergence as an innate human potential, a movement towards enhanced emotional and psychosomatic health, freedom, and deeper connections with people, nature, and the universe. The research findings conclude that all four participants experienced kundalini activation and heart opening, which according to Greenwell (1990) are significant events in the awakening process and indicate permanent transformation and transition to the subtle stage.

Analysing the above, it would be apt to state that the spiritual awakening process explores aspects of self-enquiry (introspection); self-improvement (personal growth); self-mastery (self-actualisation) and Oneness with the Divine. This process acts as a catalyst and changes the way an individual interacts or connects within and with the world. Thus, the profound shift in consciousness is explained as a spiritual awakening.

3. Historic Connection between Indian Classical Dance and Spirituality

Indian literature on art explains the importance of dance in the Hindu religion. The origin of the same is traced from the pre-historic times when it existed as a general force in the life of man to the organised style with the evolution of civilisation. Its significance is best illustrated by its theology where the deities themselves are represented as artists in the Hindu mythology.

The work of Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan (1977), gives a detailed insight into the literature that traces the reference of dancing to its earliest time. The fact that dancing was an important feature in the ritualistic practices of our faith. It was witnessed during the birth and death of individuals, the sacrificial rituals, the temple dances and a mode of entertainment. Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan has explored the various literature available from the pre-Vedic times to the 18th century written by various scholars over time and across the width and breadth of India. She states, “the rich shaitya forms the basis of dance. It lends its gravity and dignity of purpose and when it is presented by a truly inspired and dedicated dancer, it is imbued with a new and profound significance.” According to Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, “the part played by Indian classical dancers in the Vedic & Sanskrit literature cannot be over-emphasised. It has influenced the writers in a way that they are sensitive to the minute technical details and exhibit a knowledge of the art incomparable to any reference to it found in other literature in the world.”

Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* is considered as the earliest textual source for dancing, specifying the root and origin of all dances in India. The *Natyashastra* does not describe or define any particular style of dance form. There have been numerous texts that have been written over the centuries that share commentaries within the framework of the NS (Vatsyayan 1997, Bose 1998). Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan (1997) in her book, *Indian Classical Dance* elaborates on the History of Dance and has detailed reference to five Indian classical dances; namely Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Odissi, Manipuri and Kathak. Her work establishes the framework of *Natyashastra* as the basis for all the regional texts regarding dance.

Another scholar Bose (1989) states, “Most of the Sanskrit works now extant were written between the eleventh and the seventeenth centuries, and these, while they follow the *Natyashastra* in the main in their accounts, often attempt to fit into Bharata's framework altogether new types of body movements representing regional variations. One of the most important contributions to the discussion of regional styles is that of the *Sangharatnakara*. The texts that followed it from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century drew heavily upon it, although with their own variations. For instance, these later texts began to incorporate more and more regional terms.”

It would be apt to state that the various forms of Indian classical dances that we witness today is a result of these regional scholarly commentaries that explored dance in context of *Natyashastra* that shaped and influenced the regional adaption through its religious tradition and culture of those times. It is evident from the sculptures in temples, that Indian classical dance has its root in religious worship across the country and an integral aspect of Indian society. Dr. Padma Subramaniam (<https://youtu.be/DRHaw2KhY9o>) in her documentary has referred to the various Indian classical dance styles as the “Daughters of *Natyashastra*”.

The *Natyashastra* (chapter 1, shloka No. 8, 9 and 10) (Ghosh, 2023) was created to be an object of diversion for people of all the colour group, addicted to sensual pleasures, under the sway of desire and greed and affected by jealousy and anger. The *Natyashastra* (chapter 1, shloka No. 14 and 15) considered as the fifth Veda, with the semi-historical tales (*itihas*), which will be conducive to duty (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*) as well as fame, will contain good counsel and collection (of traditional maxims), will give guidance to people of the future as well, in all their actions, will be enriched by the teaching of all authoritative work (*sastra*) and will give a review of all arts and craft. This clarifies the intent for which the *Natyashastra* was created. It propagates upliftment of society that reflects *dharma* and draws on the eternal truth of all the Veda, leading people to fulfil their purpose in life. The duty and traditional maxims enriched by the *sastra* contribute to enhance the spiritual enrichment of the dancer in his/her understanding of the aesthetics, ethics, and the human experience. The dancer's ability to explore his/her inner personality by devoting their lives to perfecting the art they love

is the embodiment towards spiritual awakening. It would be thus fitting to see art as a form of ‘Divine Transmission and Intervention.’

The third section of the Vishnudharmottara Puran (Shah, 1990), a Sanskrit text, details the literature related to art and aesthetics. The text also highlights the spiritual aspects of art as a path to liberation (moksha).

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan (1977) scholarly work, explains art as a discipline (*sadhana*), a yoga and a sacrifice (*yajna*). According to her, “any form of *sadhana* is a means of achieving a state of complete harmony (*Samarasya*) and thus of total release (*Svatantrya*) from the ‘so-much-ness’ (*iyatta*) of life. It leads to a recognition of one’s truer self – this is what the Indian artist pursued.”

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan (1977) further states that the aesthetic which emerged as a result of this belief was the theory of *Rasa*. This theory of *rasa* has two aspects, the first that is the evoked state (*rasavastha*) in which the transcendental bliss is experienced and the second is the sentiment, the moods, the permanent and transitory states which are the object of presentation. According to her the second provided the content of art while the first was its ultimate object. Her work is supported by commentaries of scholars as quoted in her work, “the scholars agreed that the state of being which this art-experience evoked was a state akin to that of spiritual realization.”

A study conducted by Chirmi Acharya and Madhu Jain (2016) on, ‘Indian Classical Dances as Yoga: a Route to Powering Positive Psychological Traits’, emphasize the underlying unity of both yoga and Indian classical dance, in promoting wellbeing and manifesting the spiritual states and in experiencing the bliss of art which is similar to realising God in oneself.

In yet another study by Kleft (2014) titled, ‘Dance as a moving spirituality: A case study of Movement Medicine’, the scholar describes “dance as a moving spirituality through the case study of a specific practice called Movement Medicine. It addresses how a danced spirituality differs from other forms of spirituality, such as meditation and contemplation, and attempts to explore some of the aspects that make dance a unique medium for an embodied, lived and creative spirituality.” Her research concludes, “Dance is therefore a useful tool to recognize and move the spirit that is alive within us. When this happens, we come to know nature, ancestors, spirit and the divine as inseparable parts of ourselves. From that moment, previous dualities are lifted, and the language of ‘reconnection’ is no longer necessary. Until then, dance is an ordinary way to reconnect with extraordinary phenomena – a moving spirituality.” There are similar articles and studies that highlight the connection of dance and its spiritual significance.

4. Insights gathered through review of print and other media of Historically Senior Indian Classical Dancers about spirituality and dance

There are various commentaries by Indian classical dance exponents that have quoted their experiences on Dance and Spirituality as follows:

1. Rukmini Devi, Dances of India (Vivekanand Kendra Patrika), in her article The Spiritual Background of Indian Dance explains, “Indian dance being spiritual and suited only for spiritual expression”.
2. Prof. (Dr.) Rajeev Indramani Jha shared insights of his guru Natraj Pt. Gopi Krishnaji’s perspectives on dance and spirituality. He was taught the Ganesh Vandana by Pt. Gopiji. Gopiji had taught some very beautiful poses in this Vandana. This creative aspect of introducing postures was based on his research. Prof. Jha mentioned that whenever Pt. Gopiji travelled, within or outside India, especially to Southeast Asian countries, he had the inclination to explore and study the sculptures of Ganesh and other deities and would try to incorporate them in the Kathak dance form. It is a known fact that Indian culture has its reach in the southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Bali, Cambodia etc. Pt. Gopiji had very beautifully and in simple words explained the spiritual context of all the dances that are presented in the praise of Gods. He explained, “it is not that the Gods, deities are dancing in real life - they are not dancers! However, it is our devotion towards the deities that gets us to aesthetically present the bhava in their praise.”

3. The researcher's late Guru Smt. Asha Anant Joglekar would often mention, "Dance is my pooja.". She considered dance as worship.
4. Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam has quoted in her editorial, Dances of India (Vivekanand Kendra Patrika), "the ideal dance is that which emanates beauty and joy at the various levels of human understanding and perceptions such as physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual."
5. Pt. Briju Maharaj in an interview at the Art of Living (<https://www.artofliving.org/interview-birju-maharaj>) stated, "yes, classical dance is one of the ways to connect with the divine. Hence it is called a *sadhana*. I tell my students, to imagine that each time they strike a pose (*sama*), let their eyes look at Krishna, that way there is an inherent *bhakti* (devotion) in the dance. The *tatkar* (footwork) practice should be like a *japa* (chant) where instead of 'hare ram hare krishna' we are saying 'na dhin dhin na'. When dance is done with that emotion, it connects us to the divine."
6. In an in an interview with the World Forum for Art and Culture on 'Bhakti Through Dance' (<https://youtu.be/UwII5Di66TE>), Dr. Puru Dadheech insights on spirituality, dance and devotion states, "as per the *Navadha* bhakti, one of them is the imitation of the pastimes that God has performed. Just as a child imitates the adult seeing which the adult gets happy. Similarly, the Divine is pleased when his pastimes are imitated and offered to him. This is the inner intention of *Navadha* bhakti. Swami Vallabhacharya Ji, Haridas Ji performed Raslila with the similar intention. Even the Ram Leela that is performed is based on the similar intent and sentiments, to please the God. Our Indian dance, be it from south India or Odissi, or Kathak or Manipuri, all are connected to the temples. The Mughal period had its influence and saw the classical dance reach the courts of the rulers. However, its origin has always been connected to the temples. "*Nrutyate Prahastama bhavate yatantri bhakitta....*" The one with utmost devotion to God, dances in front of God and imitates his pastime, all the sins of his previous birth are destroyed. Our dance is a medium of worshipping the Divine. Even to this day, all the presentations that are done are based on mythology stories. Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, or Odissi are about the stories of God. This is the path to reach Him. This is the path of *Saguna Upasna*. In life what we like we offer to 'Ishwar' (Divine). '*Yat karomi tat takadkhilam Shambho tava aradhanam*', meaning 'whatever I do, oh Shiva, I offer it all as worship to you'. So, in a similar sense, Dance is worship of the Divine and should be performed with the same *bhava* (sentiments). Even if one approaches dance as entertainment, but as one starts to get deep into it, it will ultimately lead to Him. Just like *Saguna Upasna* leads to *Nirgun upasna*".

The scholar personally views dance as a gift of the Divine to the mortal souls. The literature review shares insights about the concept of spirituality, the spiritual awakening process and the linkage of Indian classical dance and spirituality. It is apparent that spirituality does not define a fixed path for everyone. It is a lived experience that shapes the relationship of an individual with self, the world around and the Higher Power. Each seeker attempts to reap the benefits of spirituality in the journey of self-exploration to live a more meaningful life.

Research Methodology

The subject of Performing Arts largely falls under the domain of Humanities and thus the application of the research methodology differs from that used under science. The perspective of humanities research offers a different perspective and understanding of the world as compared to science. Humanities study encourages empathy and understanding and fosters a deeper connection between individuals and their shared humanity. It would be apt to state that research under humanities that include performing arts among other areas aims to understand the socially constructive nature of reality.

This research is based on the epistemological approach. It is a phenomenological inquiry that probes into the existential and spiritual metamorphoses undergone by practitioners of Indian Classical Dance. Edmund Husserl, the founder of Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994)¹⁵, emphasises subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for derivation of knowledge. According to Husserl, it is logical in its assertion that the only thing we know for certain is that which appears before us in consciousness, and that very fact is a guarantee of its objectivity.

Research Approach

The approach that supports this type of research is primarily qualitative. The focus is to gain an in-depth understanding of human behaviour, experience, attitudes, intentions, and motivations, on the basis of observation and interpretation, to find out the way people think and feel. The aim is to understand the “how and Why” of human behaviour that will provide for deep contextual insights that help create hypotheses and grasp phenomena. This approach stresses on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants. In particular, a phenomenological inquiry has been adopted to probe into the existential and spiritual metamorphoses undergone by practitioners of Indian classical dance.

Tools Used

Tools used for the research consisted of an interview schedule. The in-depth conversations / interviews were primarily open-ended questions allowing the respondent to articulate their experiences from their own point of view, a qualitative method. A total of 10 questions focusing on various aspects of the research were constructed.

Sampling and Participants

The research adopted the convenient sampling method. The interview process was used with senior Indian Classical Dancers / Guru's. These respondents were accomplished Indian classical Dancers – who have dedicated their lifetime to classical dance. The purposive and snowball sampling approach was adopted in the interview process. The data gathered was analysed through thematic analysis.

Dancers Interviewed

The interviews were conducted with 10 Indian classical dancers. The details of which are mentioned in the table below.

Dancers Interviewed

Sr. No	Name	Dance Form
1	Dr. Manjiri Shreeram Deo	Kathak
2	Ms. Jyoti Shidhaye	Kathak
3	Ms. Shubhada Varadkar	Odissi
4	Ms. Ranjana Phadke	Kathak
5	Ms. Jhelum Paranjape	Odissi
6	Ms. Prateesha Suresh	Sattriya
7	Ms. Sujata Nair	Bharatnatyam, Mohiniyattam & Odissi
8	Shri Narendra Gangani	Kathak
9	Ms. Alka Lajmi	Bharatnatyam
10	Ms. Poulshila Chatterjee	Manipuri

Challenges faced

The researcher faced limitations in seeking appointments with some senior dance gurus due to their non-availability (due to tight performance and travel schedule). Some dancers requested for an honorarium, which was not possible for the researcher to fulfil. This proved to be a limitation to get the desired inputs and restricted the sample size.

Data Analysis

A. Demographic details of the survey

Of the face-to-face respondents, the majority (90%) are females and the remaining 10 percent male. Majority (40%) of the respondents are Kathak dancers, followed by 20 per cent Odissi dancers, 10 percent Sattriya, Manipuri and Mohiniyattam and Bharatnatyam dancers in each category. One of the respondents, Ms. Sujata Nair is a multifaceted dancer. She specialises in Bharatnatyam, Mohiniyattam and Odissi. Majority (60 %) of the respondents belong to the age group 61 years and above, 20 % in the age group 51 to 60 years and 10% in the age group 31 to 40 years and 41 to 50 years respectively.

B. To explore the perspective of classical dancers regarding their spiritual awakening experiences

1. Dance as a Path to Spiritual Awakening

Most dancers strongly affirm that classical dance is a medium for spiritual awakening. Dr. Manjiri Deo describes it as lifelong sadhana, inseparable from her identity, and a way to connect with Ishvar Shakti. She distinguishes between nritya kala (performing art) and atmika nritya (spiritual dance), where true expression balances audience engagement with divine communion.

Ms. Shubhada Varadkar interprets Odissi symbolically as a reflection of soul evolution: Mangalacharan as sowing the seed, pure dance as purification, abhinaya as flowering, and moksha as liberation. She sees Radha as the atma longing for the paramatma, making performance a spiritual metaphor.

Ms. Alka Lajmi emphasizes temple origins, where dance is not performance but offering. Sacred settings transform dance into direct dialogue with God. Similarly, Ms. Sujata Nair, raised in a spiritually rich household, experiences dance as natural devotion, inseparable from daily life.

Others, like Ms. Jyoti Shidhaye, stress dance as a discipline leading to moksha. For her, each life is part of a karmic journey, and dance becomes a means of fulfilling spiritual purpose. Conversely, some dancers, such as Ms. Ranjana Phadke, Ms. Jhelum Paranjape, and Ms. Poushali Chatterjee, approach spirituality from non-religious or pragmatic stances. Yet even they acknowledge that dance evokes profound experiences of joy, surrender, and personal awakening.

Shri. Narendra Gangani, born into a lineage of dancers, views dance as divine inheritance and destiny. His practice embodies devotion to Shiva and Krishna, where rhythm and movement mirror cosmic union.

2. Understanding Spirituality

Dancers express diverse but interconnected views of spirituality. Dr. Manjiri Deo defines it as changulpana (moral uprightness, purity, compassion). Ms. Shubhada Varadkar echoes this, linking spirituality to humanity, harmony, and ethical living. Ms. Alka Lajmi sees it as self-correction, discipline, and growth beyond materialism.

For Ms. Sujata Nair, spirituality is wordless and experiential—impossible to explain without diluting its essence. Ms. Poushali Chatterjee views it as self-awareness and detachment from ego-driven comparison, while Ms. Jyoti Shidhaye interprets it as a mental, consciousness-based practice aligned with yogic traditions.

Ms. Ranjana Phadke equates spirituality with nritya seva—work as worship through uncompromising dedication. Ms. Prateesha Suresh emphasizes philosophy and bhakti (servitude), while Ms. Jhelum Paranjape stresses faith in whatever one does.

Shri. Narendra Gangani roots Kathak in divine mythology, citing its origins in Shiva-Parvati's tandava and lasya. For him, rhythmic syllables reflect the gopis' search for Krishna, and the sum (beat) symbolizes divine union.

3. Role of Dance in Their Lives

Across narratives, dance emerges as central to existence. Dr. Manjiri Deo compares it to breath—essential for survival. Ms. Shubhada Varadkar calls it her destiny and karmic path, inseparable from her soul. She transitioned from Bharatanatyam to Odissi not by choice but by divine calling, aligning with higher purpose.

For Ms. Alka Lajmi, dance is ritual and discipline, transforming into sadhana when infused with spiritual perspective. Ms. Jyoti Nair takes this further: dance is not performance but worship, a romance with God present even in mundane tasks. Ms. Poushali Chatterjee views it as a stress-buster, healer, and life compass, blending tradition with modern concerns like climate change and cultural preservation.

Ms. Jyoti Shidhaye regards it as direct sadhana toward moksha. Ms. Ranjana Phadke calls it her uncompromised nritya seva. Ms. Prateesha Suresh sees it as an inherent spiritual path tied to Dasya Bhakti. Paranjape experiences it as escape, healing, and transformation, especially through teaching.

Shri Narendra Gangani treats dance as both artistic responsibility and sacred duty. His role as guru requires ethical integrity, detachment from exploitation, and transmission of purity.

4. Personal Experiences of Awakening

Many dancers describe transcendental moments where ego dissolves and divine presence takes over. Dr. Manjiri Deo sees dance as ongoing service to God, while Ms. Shubhada Varadkar recalls performances where surrender overcame physical illness, leading to states where “the body doesn't exist.”

Ms. Alka Lajmi recounts deeper experiences in sacred spaces, where dance shifts from technique to introspection, creating a higher spiritual connection. Ms. Sujata Nair emphasizes her romantic intimacy with God through abhinaya, coupled with awareness of her witness self (sakshi) even in emotional immersion.

Ms. Poushali Chatterjee remembers Manipuri rituals where collective devotion overshadowed technicality, making the experience spiritual. Ms. Jyoti Shidhaye narrates measurable proof—her aura expanding during performance, validating divine presence. Audience feedback often reinforced these moments.

Ms. Ranjana Phadke speaks of meditative flow states in tatkar, moments of bliss beyond material pleasure, attributed to divine grace. Before a solo show, she surrendered to Nataraja, performing beyond her physical limits.

Ms. Prateesha Suresh describes tears during dance akin to prayer. Ms. Jhelum Paranjape recalls becoming the character, leading to deep emotional release. Shri Narendra Gangani recounts surrendering during a temple performance in extreme heat, producing a powerful, divinely inspired performance.

5. Rasa and Bhava as Pathways

The aesthetic dimensions of rasa (essence) and bhava (emotion) are central to spiritual realization. Dr. Manjiri Deo emphasizes the journey from shringara (sensual) to shanta rasa (peace), where bhava transcends art to become spiritual realization.

Ms. Shubhada Varadkar illustrates how even erotic poetry transforms into spiritual experience, citing performances that lead to states like nirvikalpa samadhi. Ms. Poushali Chatterjee, Ms. Jyoti Shidhaye, and Ms. Jhelum Paranjape all share experiences of dissolving into characters, losing themselves in roles like Meera, Radha, or Krishna.

Ms. Ranjana Phadke acknowledges that not every bhava is spiritual but admits deep abhinaya often dissolves self-awareness. Ms Prateesha Suresh highlights bhakti bhava (surrender) as her most personal and transformative experience. For Shri Narendra Gangani, audience applause is not fame but divine grace, a sign of alignment between dancer, art, and higher power.

The research highlights how Indian classical dancers experience spiritual awakening through their art. For practitioners, dance is not merely performance but a sacred path that merges cultural, devotional, and meditative dimensions. Rooted in temple traditions and referenced in scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, dance is seen as a means to reach stillness and connect with the divine.

Bhakti (devotion) emerges as a universal theme. Many dancers equate dance with prayer, surrender, or communion with God. Even those less religious approach it with intentionality and clarity, redefining devotion in spiritual rather than ritualistic terms. Spirituality, in their understanding, involves faith, detachment from materialism, and cultivating better human connections.

Daily riyaz (practice) is treated as sadhana (discipline) akin to meditation. Exercises like tatkar or abhinaya become acts of prayer, nurturing humility and inner balance. Performance further deepens this awakening, often producing alaukik (extraordinary) states where dancers lose ego, transcend time, and feel divine intervention.

Central to this process is rasa and bhava, the emotional and aesthetic core of Indian classical dance. True performances evoke “Rasa-anand,” uniting dancer and audience in shared spiritual bliss. Ultimately, dance becomes a lifelong pathway to inner awakening, surrender, and divine oneness.

Researcher’s personal experiences and analysis

The researcher has been practising the classical dance form of Kathak for the past fifteen years. The researcher's journey on the spiritual path has been both a transitional and transformational process. At the beginning of the journey the researcher’s connection with the Divine was at surface-level. The researcher acknowledges the idea of the “Higher Power”. However, today this idea has transformed into a deeply rooted conviction. The researcher experiences Divine guidance in all aspects of her life. This connection was prompted by firstly, the mythological aspects of the dance. The exposure helped the researcher get a deeper understanding of the origin, values, and beliefs of our culture. It prompted the researcher to dwell further and comprehend the nature of the divine, purpose of existence and relationship between humans and the universe. The second connection was prompted by the practices of meditation and Riyaz. It taught the researcher to have faith in self, the Dance Guru’s, and The Divine. This faith taught the research to “Surrender to the Divine”. The riyaz (practice) sessions created a sense of trance and a high that can only be experienced and expressed as a form of meditative bhakti.

The researcher’s expression of spirituality is explained as a way of life with a commitment to self and the lives she touches. A journey that has got her to be in a mode of constant inward reflection, to practise silence and listen to the inner voice. It means to be at peace with oneself. To accept one’s strengths and flaws and work towards improvement. It means to do your role in life and live with the mindset of service and love and surrender to the will of the Higher Force. In moments of setbacks and dilemma, the practice of “Surrender to the Divine’ has led to solutions unfolding effortlessly.

Classical Dance for the researcher, is like a ritual that has helped the dancer change her relationship with self and the world. There is a sense of inner peace that has installed a sense of non-compete with the world around. Dance is a mode to seek pleasure and happiness for self and to those observing (audience). The researcher is guided by the values of love and compassion and is progressively working on the value of accepting fellow beings with love and respect. Her realisation has been that all individuals desire for peace, love, and fulfilment and thus the need to develop empathy and compassion as a natural response to everything.

Conclusion

The researcher's personal experiences as a classical dancer, echoes and divulge experiences in line with the research data that elucidates the espoused theory of the classical dancers in context of their spiritual experiences. It ensured that findings were not isolated interpretations but reflected shared and substantiated lived realities of spiritual awakening through dance. The overall research findings highlight that the dancers and the researcher have witnessed significant transformation in self that contributed to living with joy and contentment, increased self-awareness, inner peace, and a stronger connection with the Divine. It is observed that the responses and the experiences shared by the Indian classical dancers resonate with the understanding and idea of spirituality. It clearly brings out the essence of the experience lived by the respondent. The finding validates the experiences, beliefs and values that are embodied in the process of spiritual awakening. The research findings uphold the espoused theory in the context of the embodied spiritual awakening experiences by Indian classical dancers. Further investigations must be undertaken to include experiences of senior dance gurus. Research studies with larger scope are recommended with a wider representative of the population that will provide a diverse perspective. One could also explore the interdisciplinary research linking aspects of psychology, therapy, performance, and self-development. The researcher recommends training conducted through the Guru-shishya Parampara to integrate spiritual education into dance. And recognise dance as a path towards inner peace and expression of bhakti and mental well-being.

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