

## Flow-Through the eyes of Indian classical dancers

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### ABSTRACT

Flow state refers to an optimal psychological experience associated with a complete sense of involvement in the task at hand. The present study aims to qualitatively look at patterns of subjective experiences of flow among Indian classical dancers who have been through formal training and are in practice at the time of conduction of research. Focused Group Discussions (FGD) with unstructured interview format were used to collect data. Thematic analysis was used to qualitatively interpret the data. The results from the study provide an understanding of the experience of flow in Indian classical dancers and further identify influences facilitating and inhibiting the flow experience. The emergent idea visualizes flow as a mental journey of transcendence. Flow is a psychological state attainable when one transcends the perceived boundaries of one's art form and break away from the constraints posed by its norms to proceed into an abstract, yet an intense sense of involvement and energized focus. The study looks forward to contributing to the existing literature in the field of positive psychology concerning the concept of flow in artistic creation, more specifically focused on the art form of dance in the Indian context.

**Keywords:** *Flow, Indian Classical Dance, Qualitative, Transcendence, Abstract Realm*

Flow is the all-encompassing sense of fulfillment experienced by an individual in a state of complete immersion in an activity deemed enjoyable. A flow experience is characterized by nine universal dimensions (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Firstly, flow is seen as an optimal psychological state facilitated by a balance between a situation's perceived challenge and the capability or skill of a person for action (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Imbalance in the skill to challenge ratio may give rise to boredom, if individual's skills are perceived to be at a higher level than the challenge, or anxiety, when the challenge of the activity is higher than the individual's skill level. Flow has been further regarded as an autotelic experience, which brings the recipient much enjoyment and is said to be intrinsically rewarding (Jackson & Eklund, 2004). The flow experience also includes a merging of action and awareness, where one is completely absorbed in the task at hand; a singular purpose, with an almost instinctual knowledge of what to do next; a direct and immediate feedback, wherein one is able to constantly adjust one's reactions to meet the current demands; a sense of focus, which

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allows concentration on the task at hand by excluding unnecessary distractions; a sense of absolute personal control; a loss of self-consciousness, where the act of involvement in the task shadows the need to protect one's ego; and lastly, a distortion in one's sense of time, which is perceived as time slowing down or flying past due to complete engagement in the moment (Jackson & Marsh, 1996).

A flow state of mind has been described in Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist literature as well (Moore, 2020). The core idea of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, aligning with aspects of flow, is not forcing or grasping one's way through life, but instead living life spontaneously, in harmony with the natural order of things. When the Taoists and Buddhists speak of going with the flow, they allude to the river of nature and reason, which are believed to be the underlying order of the universe (Pies, 2020). In Hindu literature, the concept of flow is reflected in the teachings of the Gita, which state that one must practice and master the art of enjoying the process of work itself, rather than the end goal to find true inner peace ("Karma: Yoga and Flow", 2014).

Literature suggests a neurobiological basis to the flow experience. A flow experience is proposed to occur during a state of transient hypofrontality, which causes inhibition of the explicit system of information processing related to conscious awareness, and also temporarily suppresses the analytical and meta-conscious capacities of the higher cognitive functions (Dietrich, 2004). During a flow experience, a highly practiced skill is applied from the brain's implicit system of information processing, which is related to skill-based content inaccessible to conscious awareness (Ashby & Casale, 2002; Dienes & Perner, 1999; Schacter & Bruckner, 1998), while suppressing neural activity in the higher cognitive centers of the prefrontal cortex, and thus the explicit system (Dietrich, 2003; Dietrich & Sparling, 2004).

Phenomenological approaches to study of flow have obtained experiential accounts consistent with study findings stating decreased prefrontal function, such as the disappearance of self-consciousness, decreased worry of failure, a sense of timelessness, and no distractions during a flow experience (Dietrich, 2003). Thus, the one-pointedness of mind occurring during flow can be neurobiologically explained by the selective disengagement of other higher cognitive abilities of the prefrontal cortex. In flow, attention is focused on actively amplifying the task at hand until it becomes the exclusive content in the working memory. This attentional effort serves to accomplish the exclusion of other, intruding sensory, emotional, or cognitive information. This results in an awareness that is limited to the here and now with no indication of cognitive flexibility, a mental singularity.

Flow, as a psychological state of mind, can influence optimal performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1982, 1990, 1997). Champions and principal dancers have been found to experience flow during their best performances (Kimiecik & Stein, 1992).

Indian art abounds in poetic imagery. As a performing artist, a dancer uses each part of the body, such as the limbs, hands, face, eyes, and movements to bring alive the emotion or idea in a text, poem or story recited in the song. In Indian classical dance, the body is an instrument of symbolism, focusing on stories of folklore, worship, and praise of the Almighty and important mythological figures. The dancer's gesticulations serve as a medium of connection used to draw the audience into the dancer's world of storytelling. The expressions displayed by a dancer during a performance is a result of a particular emotion he/she experiences within and it helps create the relevant mood or emotion in others.

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*Abhinaya Darpanam* states, “The actors educate the spectator by stimulating in him the latent possibility of aesthetic experience” (“Abhinaya”, n.d.).

In Indian classical dance literature, the Rasa theory states that the aim of artistic creation is evocation (Argada, n.d.). The aesthetic experience is a perception of artistic creation. It is the emotive content that makes artistic work relishable. Hence, both the artist and the audience have an active role in the achievement of the aim of the performance- the aesthetic enjoyment, the rasa.

Natyashashtra, the ancient treatise of dance, emphasizes the oneness of action and emotion, and the act of complete immersion as being crucial to evoke deep emotion, a unity of mind and body, which is essentially what the concept of flow embodies (“Abhinaya Dharpana”, 2014).

In light of the parallels drawn between Csikszentmihalyi’s flow concept and ancient Indian classical dance literature, the present study seeks to understand the subjective experience of flow during a performance in dancers trained in Indian Classical dance form(s). Furthermore, this study attempts to examine factors that are reported to facilitate or inhibit the occurrence of a flow experience.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Study Setting and Participants*

The data collection was carried out at Chennai and Assam, at the dance schools of the participants included in the study. The dance forms included in the study are Odissi, Bharatnatyam, and Sattriya. Four focused group discussions were carried out, with each group consisting of 5-9 dancers.

Participants for the study were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. The participant pool consisted of 26 Indian classical dancers, out of which 24 were females and 2 were males, with ages ranging from 11 to 38 years. The number of years of training received by participants ranged from 5 to 21 years. The inclusion criteria were based on 1) individuals who underwent formal training in any of the 8 forms of Indian classical dance, 2) can converse in English, Hindi, Assamese or Tamil, 3) trained for a minimum of 5 years continuously and 4) presently involved in regular practice or teaching of dance. The exclusion criteria were based on 1) presence of any psychological problems or chronic illnesses for which they were undergoing treatment and 2) trained dancers not in regular practice of dance.

### *Study Design*

A phenomenological approach was used, which is an inductive and descriptive research approach developed from phenomenological philosophy. A phenomenological study seeks to describe the common meaning underlying individuals’ lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon, which is the concept of flow in the present case. It aims to develop a description of the phenomenon by capturing the common essence of these experiences (Cresswell, 2017).

### *Ethical Considerations*

- Informed consent was obtained from the participants for collection of data
- Participants’ identities have been kept confidential

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- Participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any point of time leading up to data analysis
- Consent was obtained for recording of the group discussion to be reviewed for academic purposes

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected through focused group discussions (FGD) from 11 January 2020 to 26 February 2020. Four FGDs were carried out in unstructured interview format. Prior to commencement of the study, participants were approached for informed consent and assured of strict confidentiality during and after the research. The group discussions were recorded using a digital voice recorder, in addition to the notes maintained by the researcher during the discussion.

An explanation of the concept of flow was provided to the group before commencement of the FGD. This was done to establish a baseline knowledge regarding the concept being studied and also to help participants identify personal experiences. After the concept of flow was introduced, the following questions were used to facilitate the FGD -

1. **Opening question.** “Have you heard of this concept, or have you personally experienced/seen/heard from teachers/contemporaries/students about any such experience?”
2. **Transition question.** “What could be the contributing factors? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your flow experiences?”

### *Data Analysis*

The audio files obtained from the discussion were translated to English wherever necessary and transcribed manually. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the obtained data. In-vivo codes for the transcribed data were independently generated by each author, followed by an independent review by the research supervisor. The codes were further examined to generate sub-themes through analysis of the prominence in the participants’ responses, after which the parent theme was identified.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The qualitative data from the study convey the central idea that a flow experience constitutes “transcending the norms of one’s art form”. It emerges as a state of mind attainable when one is relieved of the boundaries posed by the norms governing a performance. This primary theme is drawn from participants’ views that they were more likely to enter a flow zone when the basic apprehensions of performance are met with to a satisfactory extent, such as proper stage setting, adequate practice, capacity, and familiarity with the performance composition, etc. Furthermore, participants indicated a higher likelihood of flow occurring when there is more scope for interpretation and improvisation in a particular performance piece, as opposed to being bound to/by a strict choreography. These factors provide insight on how to flow, as a psychological state, can be attained by moving from the concrete realm of rules and regulations to an abstract level of feeling and involvement. Delving further into the data, the following sub-themes have emerged.

### *Experiential Intensity*

The term experiential intensity interprets flow as a state of mind that may be influenced by factors that shape the unique onstage experience of a performer at an individualistic level, such as life experiences, subjective emotional context, level of practice, age, and maturity.

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Csikszentmihalyi (1975) states that a flow experience often encompasses a loss of awareness of time, space, and person, owing to the level of involvement in an activity. This has been reiterated by a majority of the participants as part of their personal experience of flow while performing onstage, as put forward by a participant- “With years of experience, there are many times where I get immersed and involved and end up not performing the actual choreography and doing something of my own... While doing a bhakti bhava, I get goosebumps, I don’t see anything in front of me, the lights or the audience, I can only see what I am doing and it does not feel like I am doing it but it is a very different experience.”

A significant idea associated with the facilitation of a flow experience was the creation of a personal context by the performer. Aligning aspects from one’s life into the storytelling process to create a personal context or empathizing with the characters portrayed is indicated to help a performer embody the characters at a deeper level, thereby elevating the quality of emotional expression. As the performer becomes the character, he/she is likely to experience moments of raw emotion on stage, through which the connection between the spectator and performer strengthens as rasa takes place. This is interpreted by many participants as an important part of the flow experience. This is corroborated by the following lines- “...when it comes to Abhinaya I think creating a personal context works for me. For example, in a drama about Lord Rama and Sita, even though I know the story and can probably convey the story simply, but if I am able to imagine myself as Sita and replaced Ram with, say a lover or anyone I personally hold in that esteem in my life, depending on the story, I am able to show better because the emotions flow naturally.”

Maturity level, age, and experience have also been indicated to help understand and interpret the stories conveyed by dance compositions at a deeper level, which facilitates and possibly, enhances flow experience, as explained in the following lines- “For me, the time factor plays an important role as a dancer. I mean I have performed the same composition when I was very young and I am still performing it but what has changed over the years is the intensity of emotions those movements and words evoke in me, which influences my performance of it. Earlier, the movements were very mechanical but now, due to age and experience, I have context.”

The influence of age, maturity, and life experiences on facilitating flow is understood in terms of how it helps a performer understand better, the emotions required to be portrayed in a composition, which consequently facilitates a higher quality of emotional expression. However, a flow experience need not be limited by the complex understanding of human emotions often associated with older age and maturity, as indicated by another participant- “I do not feel age is a barrier to experiencing flow. A child can also experience flow, like a small child dancing on stage even after the music has stopped. Dedication and involvement are not always dependent on higher age.”

Another important aspect to attend to for a flow experience to occur is internalizing dance movements through repeated practice such that it becomes a part of the subconscious expression. Conscious apprehensions of forgetting choreography often keep a performer bound to the physical constraints of a performance. This is explained by a participant as- “When I am on stage, at the beginning of the piece, I perform quite mechanically as I have to keep thinking in the background of my head about what all the next steps are. As I ease myself into the composition, I do not need that voice playing at the back of my head, saying what to do next. The movements start flowing into each other after a point. That is when I feel I experience flow when my body takes over the performance. Without lots of practice,

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the basic tension of keeping up with the choreography remains.” A flow experience in performance has been known to result in optimal performances (Chavez, 2008-2009; Harmison, 2006).

All of the dancers interviewed had some form of ritualistic preparation associated with alleviating their anxiety before a performance, thereby influencing their perceived ability to get into flow on stage. These ritualistic preparations include practices such as immersing oneself in the composition while getting ready until the time leading up to the performance, chanting shlokas, reassurances from one’s family and friends, reassurances to self, and thinking about one’s gurus, as stated by a participant- “Something I do ritualistically before every performance is I think of my guru, who put so much effort into teaching me all these years, the different gurus who have trained me. The thought lights a fire inside me and pushes me to give it my all.”

### *Artistic Intensity*

The artistic intensity interprets flow as a state of mind that may be facilitated or inhibited by elements related to the performance arena or the art form itself. These include technicalities of dance, such as the type of composition being performed, its tempo, and the number of dancers performing; environmental factors of the stage, which include the ambience, music, lights; and details related to the appearance of a performer such as costumes and makeup.

The type of composition being performed has been indicated to act as an influencing factor in the enhancement or inhibition of flow. Participants report that Nritya and Natya have more scope of facilitating a flow experience due to the freedom of interpretation and expression it allows in the storytelling process in the form of Abhinaya. As opposed to this, a pure dance piece or Nritya demands synchronization between the rhythm and time through precise footwork, guided by strong beats and tempo. As such, in compositions involving Nritya, performers indicate that the fast pace and demand for precise movements often require conscious effort and does not accommodate a deep emotional investment on the part of a performer, due to which the emotional connection with an audience is often not established. Reiterating this idea, a participant states- “When the tempo of the song is very fast, by the time you are feeling and expressing, the next beat is already there. So, in these fast-paced compositions, I feel that the chances of experiencing flow are less. Even if you have practiced it so many times that it has become muscle memory and you are changing expressions by the second, there is no time to immerse.” Abhinaya Darpana defines Nritya as consisting of bodily movements without evoking Rasa Bhava (“Nritya, Nritya and Natya”, 2018), which further lends support to this idea.

The number of dancers performing onstage may influence opportunities of proceeding into a flow state. Solo performances have been indicated to be more likely of facilitating flow as a group performance demands an additional emphasis on coordination and reciprocity, which often requires a conscious awareness of the space being shared between dancers onstage. This is explained by a participant as- “Especially when it is a group dance, we can’t forget the space because we have to be on the feet while performing and manage if someone has missed any step. When a dancer is dancing based on ‘rhythas’ then it is not possible to forget time and space, as there is constant movement according to the ‘jathi’. But in solo performances, while performing abhinaya, there are more chances for the dancer to forget the time and space while dancing.”

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Hefferon and Ollis (2006) state that a positive connection with group members creates an ambience of mutual trust and reciprocity, which could enhance the chances of a flow experience. A participant explains this as- “I also feel a bonding of members within the groups influences the performance. If you share a close bond with your group members the performance is smooth as there is shared regard for each other. Offstage equations matter a lot because what goes on onstage is only for 10/15 minutes but the build-up towards it plays a major role.”

In terms of environmental factors associated with the stage setting, it is indicated that improper stage arrangements such as open stage conditions, poor sound, and lighting systems may greatly inhibit flow as it has been reported to make a performer very conscious of the stage space. Improper sound and light systems, uneven stage surfaces, etc. often end up causing apprehension to the performer, consequently binding him/her within the physical constraints of a performance, as stated by a participant- “On some stages, it becomes very difficult to attain that state because of factors like maybe the sound system is poor and you are not able to hear the music properly.” Hefferon and Ollis (2006) state that unfamiliar stage settings were felt to be detrimental by dancers to their ability to experience flow.

Lastly, appearance-related details of a performer such as the proper fit of costumes, ornaments, and makeup can influence the self-consciousness of a performer. The process of getting ready for performance often prepares the performer psychologically to present oneself before an audience. As such, wardrobe malfunctions or apprehensions regarding it have been indicated to diminish a performer’s focus and involvement, thereby interfering with opportunities of transcendence described in flow.

### *Collectivistic Intensity*

The collectivistic intensity interprets flow as a state of transcendence from the self and occurs as an out of body experience when the performer and the audience start to feel emotions as one unified organism. Flow describes a unity of the performer and the spectator in feeling emotions together, wherein the entire gathering feels emotion at one point in time, as though they were connected by the same mind. This has been articulated by a participant as- “When the dancer expresses the emotion of the character, both the dancer and the audience are able to relate to that emotion... Only when I express myself am I able to connect with the people and their hearts. Only then I can touch their soul. There can be a few moments where I am not aware of anything around me as am completely immersed in the character of my performance. This will not last throughout the performance for any dancer. But during those moments, I get into the minds of the audience as well.”

The transcendence experienced during a flow state has also been described as a journey into a different realm, stated by a participant as - “So when we dance, we not only sweat it out but it heals you mentally because you travel to a different realm and come back.”

Flow is, in the collectivistic sense of the term, therefore, understood as a phenomenon where a temporary shared space with the audience is created, within which the audience gets a chance to feel and think about a story together with the performer.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study revealed in-depth information regarding flow experience in Indian Classical dancers. Flow has been found to be a state of mind that is more easily attainable when one is able to move beyond the perceived boundaries of norms and break away from

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its constraints to proceed into an abstract, yet intense sense of involvement and energized focus. The study has also identified some unique facilitators and inhibitors in an environment that influence the experience of flow for dancers. Since flow has been known to induce peak performances in athletes and dancers (Kimiecik & Stein, 1992; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990), the knowledge of factors influencing flow may be used to manipulate certain elements leading up to a performance such as stage settings, costumes, rapport, and ambience to facilitate or manage obstacles of a flow experience. The present study enables us to understand the role of consciousness and attention in performances, while helping performers to be more aware of their cognitive abilities.

Limitations of this study include the fact that dancers from only three of the eight Indian classical dance forms (Bharatnatyam, Odissi, and Sattriya) could be recruited for study. Additionally, the representation of male dancers was skewed due to marginally low number of male participants. Furthermore, the age range of the sample extended from 11 to 38 years, which extends across various age group classifications, indicating differences in maturity levels and experience of participants within the dance field as well as outside. This could possibly influence subjective experiences of flow.

For recommendations of future study, we suggest the inclusion of dancers from other forms of Indian classical dance, as well as a higher representation of male dancers. The concept of flow could also be explored with a more homogenous sample, in terms of a narrower classification of the age groups included. Flow could also be explored in other modalities under performing arts such as music and theatre in future studies. In terms of methodology, a more robust mixed-method research study could be undertaken to examine the concept of flow. Additionally, a comparison of Western with oriental art forms may also be explored to understand diversity.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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