

Ecocentric and Indigenous Cultural Approaches to Mental Health & Well Being

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ABSTRACT

Ecocentrism is a philosophical term which intrinsically places the natural environment at the centre of moral consideration and not only anthropocentrism. It encompasses the concepts of extended biocentrism, recognizing the fact that species develop together over time and coexist in harmony. In the modern world, scientists, researchers, educators and artists are more inclined towards introducing new artistic ways of connecting to the environment to promote and encourage ecological balance. One such artistic way is the form of environmental dance and music which has always been an integral part of the environment since ages, conceptualising ecocentrism in somatic practice. Gestures and movements are considered to be the root of all human concepts, thus, 'dance', is regarded as the closest form of art of being human and to understand humanism (Best, 1999). Environmental dance is regarded as dance and somatic practices which establishes a relationship between the body and the whole environment, including the landscapes, flora and fauna (Stewart, 2010). Many indigenous dances offer healing and coping mechanism, allowing many youth and elderly person to open their mind and experience the imaginary feeling in actual physical movement. The aim of the paper is to understand the importance of ecocentric indigenous dance, music and cultural factor as a modern psychological tool to support mental health practices.

Keywords: *Ecocentric, Ecocentrism, Indigenous Approaches, Mental Health, Well Being, North-East India, Dance Therapy, Indigenous Dance, Tribal Dance*

Ecocentrism is a philosophical term which intrinsically places the natural environment at the centre of moral consideration and not only anthropocentrism where the attitude of human is generally aggressive, selfish and egoist towards environment as they believe that nature is a storehouse for men, which they can use it as per their needs and demands (Barman, 2018). Ecocentrism attempts to ensure essential value to all natural communities as it encompasses the concepts of extended biocentrism, recognizing the fact that species develop together over time and coexist in harmony. In the modern world, scientists, researchers, educators and artists are more inclined towards introducing new artistic ways of connecting to the environment to promote and encourage ecological balance. One such artistic way is the form of environmental dance and music which has always been an integral part of the environment since ages, conceptualising ecocentrism in somatic

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practice. Gestures and movements are considered to be the root of all human concepts, thus, 'dance', is regarded as the closest form of art of being human and to understand humanism (Best, 1999). Environmental dance is regarded as dance and somatic practices which establishes a relationship between the body and the whole environment, including the landscapes, flora and fauna (Stewart, 2010). Many indigenous dances offer healing and coping mechanism, allowing many youth and elderly person to open their mind and experience the imaginary feeling in actual physical movement. The aim of the paper is to understand the importance of ecocentric indigenous dance, music and cultural factor as a modern psychological tool to support mental health practices.

Ecocentrism

In the field of environmental ethics, ecocentrism is an important normative theory that emphasis on holistic systems, hence, ecocentrists should strongly work on preventing a collapse of civilization and premature destruction of the biosphere (Jebari et al, 2022). Ecocentrism provides a strong ethical evaluation of the negative impact by humans on the biosphere of earth and the rapid diminishment of life. Health and well being of human and the planet is inseparable, hence, when the natural balance is disrupted, it adversely affects the health and quality of life of humans (Gary J et al, 2018). The ecocentric approach is based on biological and social community values which does not treat nature as a resource, opposes long-term degradation of environment and places biodiversity at the centre, therefore, adopting its principles would positively impact the society and the well-being of human and the ecosystems (Guczalska K, 2023). Ecocentrism provides an ethical perspective emphasizing on the interconnectedness and interdependence of all the elements of an ecosystem, giving a chance to rehabilitate the relationship of humans with nature and promote ecological balance and long-term sustainability; encouraging humans to adopt lifestyle models where they respect nature's ecology to maintain healthy ecosystems (Kalita N et al, 2024).

Ecocentrism and Quality of life (QoL)

According to WHO, quality of life not only emphasizes on absence of disease or infirmity, but also a state of complete psychological, mental and social well being of a person. QoL of a person is based on both objective and subjective components where the environment plays a very vital role in promoting life satisfaction, happiness and overall well-being. Evidence suggests that environmental pollution (like noise, air and water pollution) and extreme weather conditions may adversely affect one of the 'relatively important' factor for QoL i.e. mental well-being (Crocker M. et al, 2021) of a person while positive factor (like parks, sports and recreational opportunities) provide greater mental health and well-being (Sirgy J.M. et al, 2012). It is conceptualized that people who perceive positive environmental effects has higher life satisfaction as they are supposedly more affectively, cognitively, and experientially related to the natural world (Nisbet E. et al, 2009).

Dance and environment

Dance and dance forms coexist with nature, as far back as the earliest human civilisations can be traced and the evidence of primitive dance forms can still be seen through rock paintings. Dance forms are not only for mere entertainment but are also used as means of communication, storytelling and evoking emotions through movements, gestures and expressions, many of which are mimicked from the nearby flora, fauna and force of nature. In many primitive societies, dances were performed before hunting, harvesting season, religious and spiritual purpose, birth, marriage, death etc. Many of these dance forms

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accompanied by music have taken a cultural turn and have paved its way through the modern times as well.

A scientific evidence of a dynamic relationship between physical movement and psychological state through the neuroendocrine system (which transmits emotional regulation signals through hormones) and autonomic nervous system (which regulates heart rate and respiratory adaptation movements) is established by researchers and as *environmental dance therapy* works through multi-sensory stimulation like forest greenery for reducing fatigue, bird songs to divert negative thoughts, seaside sea breeze to soothe sympathetic nerves, and tidal rhythms for guiding breathing and synchronized movement; hence providing underlying support and platform for environmental dance therapy of having scientific principles for promoting mental health and well being (Yuan Z, 2025).

Indigenous/ Tribal dance

The traditional knowledge of the tribal communities about life and the ecosystem safeguard the ethnicity of their communities by ensuring optimum utilization of resources for long term sustainability. Indigenous Knowledge possessed by a culture or society is very functional and lively in nature as it influences local level decision making, health care and a way to connect self to nature. The indigenous dance forms are not only mere dance forms but a way to connect and get closer to nature. It is a theatrical way to inculcate knowledge and provide better insight about the outstanding traditional knowledge of nature to the modern day generations. This knowledge is a part of the ancient folk lore which is transferred from one generation to other in the form of art, dance, music, food etc. However, the traditional indigenous art forms are fading due to generational gap, modernization and westernization.

As there are numerous folklores and dances in India, the paper majorly focuses on the indigenous culture of North-east India which comprises of mixed ethnic groups and rich cultural heritage. Famously known as the 'seven sisters', North-East comprises of seven states namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura, with Sikkim which was added later to the border of the North east region. The folk dance between myth, ritual and culture, often immerse to shape the local identity of the community and with generational shared memories of ancient rituals and old-fashioned storytelling, bind people together to keep their indigenous heritage alive.

The rich and exotic landscape of *Assam* is spread across appx. 78,440 sq. km is yet to be fully explored. One of the most popular festivals of the state is 'Bihu' representing the true essence of Assam denoting unity of the community irrespective of any caste, creed, religion, faith and belief. Of all the three mesmerising Bihu, Rongali Bihu is the most awaited of all and is celebrated with great joy and grandeur on the beat of drums, flutes and brisk dance steps, enthralling everyone. 'Husori', a kind of religious singing with beat of drums, cymbals and a bamboo instrument, is sung by a group of young men and women who visits houses singing Husori songs and dancing to the tunes, celebrating harvest, prosperity, wellbeing and communal integrity. It gives a sense of solidarity and oneness.

The state of *Arunachal Pradesh* is divided into five cultural zones with approximately 30 communities and their 47 sub-groups. Some of the major local festivals, celebrated by both men and women in the region like 'Solung', 'Nyokom', 'Mopin', 'Chalo loku' and 'Wancho dance', are all lively and colourful festivals synced with drum beats and native songs, signifying wellbeing, protection from evil, communal well-being, good harvest, prosperity

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and a feeling of solidarity. During these festivals and celebrations, the whole community comes together to worship nature, bringing harmony and prosperity to the native people. In the recent times, the infamous 'Ziro' musical festival of the state has drawn a lot of attraction towards tribal dance and culture as it signifies sustainability, community, and cultural diversity.

The state of *Manipur* is divided in 16 districts with tribal communities like Kuki, Nagas and Meiteis. The 'Jewel of India' is distinguished by its unique and traditional dance forms, costumes, games and sports. Manipuri dances and music are mostly associated with deities and festivals, accompanied by vocal music and instruments. These dances have soft graceful steps which leaves an emotional impact on devotees. One of such dance form is 'Raslila', the epitome of Manipuri dance form, which depicts scenes of the Raslila of Radha Krishna. Another dance form is 'Pung Cholom' which is a unique classical dance form marked by a gentle rhythm and gradual build up to vigorous acrobatic movements, borrowing elements from the Manipuri martial arts like 'Thang Yannaba', 'Thang-Ta', 'Sarit Sarak' and 'MaibiJagoi'. These dance forms represents the skill of self-defence using swords and artistic movement of body. Other dance forms like Lai Haraoba, Thabal Chongba, Cheiraoba are traditional dance forms that are closely related to nature symbolizing new beginnings, peace and harmony.

The state of *Mizoram* has eight districts and three Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) for ethnic tribes of the state. It shares its international border with Myanmar and is considered as the most peaceful state in the region. The community has a high cultural significance with festivals like Alphaloni and Chapchar Kut which is celebrated by the Chakmas and Mizos, respectively to celebrate the stages of *jhum* cultivation or the seasons. The most popular tribal dance of the region is 'Cheraw' (bamboo dance), performed by youths in their colourful and attractive traditional attire. Music and song have been the common source of entertainment among the people of the community. Churches also promote and nurture the talent of youths by imparting music lessons and forming choirs.

The state of *Meghalaya* has rich mineral resources and is spread across appx 22,429 sq. km comprising the United Khasi Hills, Jaiñtia Hills and Garo Hills. It shares its international boundaries with Bangladesh. The Sanskrit meaning of Meghalaya is 'abode of clouds'. The city of Shillong is described as the 'Scotland of the East' which is a home to three major tribes i.e. Khasis, Pnars (Jaiñtias) and Achik (Garos). The matriarchal society has many dance forms, one of which is the 'Wangala dance', also known as 'Hundred Drums festival' of the Garos. In recent times the city organizes the famous 'Cherry blossom' festival which is attended by music and dance lovers from all over the world.

The state of *Nagaland* is known as the 'Land of Festivals' as it abounds with festivities all through the year. The tribal state is bounded by Myanmar, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. The state is inhabited by 16 distinguished tribes along with a number of sub-tribes. Most of the festivals revolve around agriculture which is commonly celebrated dressed in colourful traditional attire, irrespective of gender and age. Some of the common festivals like Sekrenyi, Moatsu, Sukrenye, Naknyülüm, Miu and Mimkut involve traditional games, music, folk songs and dance, seeking God's blessings for prosperity, luck, protection, guidance and courage. The state organizes the infamous 'Hornbill festival' every December for 10 days showcasing traditional and contemporary Naga culture through dance, music and folklores which is attended by people from all over the world. Indigenous musical

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instruments like bamboo mouth organs, bamboo flutes, drums made of cattle skin etc are also used during the festivals.

The state of *Sikkim* shares has four districts with it's headquarter in Gangtok. The state shares its international border with Nepal, China and Bhutan. The 'Pang Lhabsol' or the 'worship of the snowy ranges' symbolizes the victory of good over evil. Dances are performed by lamas in the 'deity's honour. Dances play an integral part in the life of the Sikkimise people. Festivals like Vaishakha, Chham, Losoong etc are performed on various occasions like harvests and other social events irrespective of gender and age. There are numerous war dances, mythological dances and mystical dances accompanied by chanting and instrumental music like sound of flutes, drums, etc.

Known for its geographical diversity, the state of *Tripura* has a rich and diverse cultural heritage representing different ethnic groups. The indigenous tribes consist of 19 tribal communities who follow their own festivals, rituals and traditions. Throughout the year, various traditional festivals and fairs like 'Kharchi', 'Unakoti Mela' and 'Banabihar Mela', are celebrated accompanied by traditional dances which showcase the cultural heritage of the people. Music and dance form are an inseparable component of these cultural fiesta where most tribal communities showcase their own distinct dance forms like 'Hozagiri', 'Wangala', 'Bizu' etc, accompanied by musical instruments like bamboo cymbal, uukhrap, kham, sumui, etc.

All these folk dances emphasis on great deal of physical agility, emotional well being and environmental connection, leading to better community solidarity and overall well being. It could be seen that how indigenous cultures in the form of dance and music play an integral part in environmental association, promoting effective mental health and social well being.

Dance as therapy

Dance is a unique form of physical activity which is widely known to improve and enhance psychological functioning. Learning dance sequences through choreographed movement may benefit social interactions, and the artistic aspect may improve overall psychological wellbeing as dance movements are equally or occasionally more effective like any other physical activity or exercises (Yan A.F. et al, 2024) and we all know that in exercise improves cognition (Ludyga S, et al 2020). Dance provides additional health benefits due to its social and interactive aspects (Keogh JWL, et al, 2009) and can increase social bonding improving psychological health (Reddish P. et al, 2013).

Anxiety disorders are often seen co-occurring with depression which contributes to impaired cognitive function and reduced quality of life. Dance interventions have been found to be positively improving depression and anxiety while enhancing well-being among older adults (Zhang Y. et al, 2025). The non-pharmacological options effectively integrate physical activity with social interaction, enhancing social cognition and emotional well-being (Himberg et al., 2018; Prudente et al., 2024). Performing common dance interventions like salsa, ballroom dance etc as well as folk dances like Chinese Guozhuang Dance and the Native American jingle dance showed positive effect on cognitive function, neuromotor function, dementia, and subjective well-being and highlighted that dance increased brain volume and neurotrophic growth functioning (Cox L. et al, 2023). Dance allows individuals to shift their emotional states and can induce alternating states of mood resulting in therapeutic cathartic releases as it embodies many curative properties that are released through movement, rhythms and self-expression (Monteiro N.M. et al, 2011). The

physiological basis of dance includes moderate-intensity physical exercise which benefits the psychological health of an individual. Dance forms enhance nerve growth factors, neurotrophic factors and angiogenesis, increasing cerebral blood flow and exerting an anti-inflammatory and pro-(neuro) regenerative effect, improving cognitive and motor functions in aging and neurological disorders (Deslandes A, et al 2009, Cobianchi S, et al 2017, Goldman J. et al, 2022). Senegalese Ndeup ritual from West African country, is a current example of a tribal therapeutic dance healing ritual used for depression (Taljaard T., 2015). If dance interventions (like aerobic dance program) are incorporated in physical education classes, it can positively impact the executive functions like inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility of primary school children and not only limited to the elderly population (Zinelabidine K, et al, 2022). The Canadian indigenous adolescents described mental health and wellness as coping skills, emotions, support systems, self-help, feeling of safety and how dance interventions positively influenced all these factors and improved their confidence, self-expression, social connections etc (Wildeman T. et al, 2024).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- *Nisbet E. et al (2009)*, the research proposed a new construct and a scale to assess the affective, cognitive, and experiential aspects of individuals' connection with nature.
- *Barman K.K. et al (2018)*, emphasized on how environmental justice can be restored by way of valuing nature.
- *Gray J.(2018)*, highlighted the meaning, implication and an overview of the concept of Ecocentrism.
- *Crocker M. et al (2021)*, assessed the relative importance of 12 key quality of life dimensions for people with and without a disability.
- *Jebari K. (2022)*, described ecocentrism and its emphasis on holistic systems along with long-term astronomical threats to the biosphere and how ecocentrists should prevent a collapse of human civilization.
- *Cox L. et al (2023)*, evaluated the health benefits of dance and dance therapy in various health domains like depression, cognitive function, neuromotor function, dementia, balance, neurological growth factors, and subjective well-being.
- *Guczalska K. (2023)*, attempted to indicate a new axiological foundation for ecocentrism.
- *Kalita N. et al (2024)*, reflected the difference between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, where he also argues that ecocentrism provides a more holistic and ethical approach in establishing humanity's relationship with nature as compared to anthropocentrism.
- *Yan A. et al (2024)*, systematically reviewed the literature on the effectiveness of structured dance interventions as compared with structured exercise programmes on psychological and cognitive outcomes across the lifespan.
- *Klaperski-van der Wal S et al (2025)*, looked at the effects of music and rhythm; partnering and social contact; and movement and physical activity and provided strong empirical evidence on the benefits effects of music, social contact, and movement on stress regulation, illustrating that dance can promote coping and foster resilience.
- *Parmar A.K. et al (2025)*, provided an overview on myth, ritual, cultural and folk traditions of North East India.
- *Zhang Y. et al (2025)*, provided a systematic review and meta-analysis on the impact of dance on anxiety, depression and well-being and compared the effects of nine distinct dance interventions on the mental health of older adults.

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- *Yuan Z. (2025)*, discussed the effect and practicality of environmental dance therapy on mental health and highlighted the urgent need for new non-verbal and experiential intervention.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic electronic search was done to establish the understanding of the importance of ecocentric indigenous dance, music and cultural factor as a modern psychological tool to support mental health practices.

Various research papers available online has highlighted the association of indigenous dance forms and mental health. The concept of this research is comparatively a new age impression; hence, starting from earliest records to 2025, 32 relevant papers were identified and included in the study.

Majority of the included papers emphasize how indigenous dance forms are primarily associated with nature and environment and how these dance forms provide effective mental health benefits.

There are numerous folk dances and cultures in India, however, this paper particularly discusses the indigenous dance, music and cultural factors of North-east India imparting long term mental and social well being.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ecocentrism, unlike anthropocentrism, offers a transformative philosophical framework and emphasizes on the intrinsic value of all living and non-living components of the ecosystem. It primarily focuses on holistic ethical perspective for long-term ecological sustainability and believes that human and planetary health is understood as inseparable. The normative theory advocates for the preservation of ecological systems as a moral imperative, challenging the extractive models of development. Ecocentrism is not merely an environmental policy but a psychosocial necessity as degradation of natural balance and extreme climatic events is adversely affecting human well-being, thereby directly influencing Quality of Life (QoL).

According to the WHO, quality of life includes complete physical, mental, and social well-being and environmental conditions plays a significant role in nurturing these dimensions. Exposure to pollution and ecological instability add up to stress, anxiety, and reduced life satisfaction. 'Environmental dance' and music emerge as an expression of ecocentrism, enhancing psychological resilience and emotional balance by extending conscious rhythmic bodily movement establishing a relationship with natural forces, landscapes, natural rhythms, and multisensory ecological stimuli. There are scientific evidence supporting the dynamic relationship between physical movement and psychological state promoting hormonal balance, support emotional regulation, increased cerebral blood flow etc.

Indigenous and tribal dance traditions provide illustrations of ecocentric embodiment and are deeply rooted in traditional ecological knowledge systems. In the Indian context, the culturally diverse region of North-East India, often referred to as the "Seven Sisters" (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura, later joined by Sikkim), offers rich examples of indigenous dance traditions and prioritize sustainable resource use and long-term environmental harmony. These dances bind communities through shared memory, ritual performance, and environmental storytelling.

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Such structured dance activities not only improve social connections but also improve executive functions such as working memory, inhibition, and cognitive flexibility among both children and older adults. It facilitates cathartic release, mood regulation, and enhanced self-expression in cases of anxiety and depression, often co-morbid and associated with diminished QoL.

Overall, the integration of ecocentrism with indigenous dance and music provides a multidimensional framework for promoting mental health and ecological consciousness. Environmental integrity and human well-being are inseparable, therefore, incorporating ecocentric indigenous practices in our life can offer sustainable and culturally grounded psychological tools for contemporary mental health practices and holistic quality of life.

Future Prospects

Although majority of the researches highlighted the potential benefits of integrating ecocentric practices like indigenous dance into modern-day mental health frameworks, there are still several significant research gaps that needs to be addressed to fully validate and harness this approach. These include:

- The connection between dance and mental health is widely acknowledged, however, further studies should investigate how various dance components like rhythm, coordination, memorization, and social synchrony can actually contribute to psychological outcomes, influence brain chemistry, neural pathways, and emotional regulation.
- Dance as a therapeutic practice has been gaining wide spread popularity, however, there is a necessity of standardized dance intervention models which can be implemented globally to scale the increased efficacy of dance as a therapeutic intervention for mental health.
- The clinical applicability of dance as a therapeutic tool should be explored more.
- Most of the current studies highlights dance as a general mean for psychological distress, however, future research should explore the targeted interventions for specific psychological conditions (like anxiety and mood disorder) to better understand its impact on the disorders.
- The long-term impact of dance-based interventions and the durability of therapeutic effects over time remains an under-explored area.
- Dance intervention programme specifying age, gender and culture should be explored as the impact of dance on cognitive, emotional, and social well-being may vary between all these factors.

In conclusion, the integration of ecocentrism with indigenous dance and music offers a multidimensional approach and by addressing these research gaps, we can create a more robust understanding of the impact of dance movement can play a pivotal role in fostering mental health, emotional balance, and a sustainable relationship with the natural world.

Implications

Preliminary evidences highlight the impact of dance movements in improving motivation, aspects of memory, social cognition and reducing distress.

- **Mental health intervention and practical guidance:** This research serves as a reference for mental health professionals to implement practical activities in various settings, such as community health care, school psychological counselling, medical institution-assisted treatments, and other relevant environments.

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- **Promoting positive ageing:** The research implies on promoting positive mental health of the elderly and improving their overall well-being through dance interventions, to alleviate their loneliness and maintain improved cognitive functioning. A professionally synchronized dance therapy is likely to evoke positive memories through physical coordination and establish new social connections through interaction.
- **Dance intervention for dementia:** Research suggests that the benefits of dance intervention are as effective as any other physical activity interventions as it almost equally improves the quality of life for people with Dementia and Parkinson's disease and improving depressive symptoms.
- **Integration of Dance Therapy:** At the policy level, there is a potential to advocate for the inclusion of the environmental dance therapy in mental health programmes, implementing it as a complementary approach to traditional therapeutic interventions.

CONCLUSION

The traces of dance forms exist in the society since thousands of years back through different cultural forms. Dancing is a powerful medium that explicitly supports mental health and fosters a strong sense of self and other interpersonal connections. The joy of movement fosters creativity, mental resilience, and physical fitness. Furthermore, enjoyment of dance leads to feelings of relaxation and a sense of being in the moment, which will dependably diminish anxiety and promote good feelings. This approach to improving man that goes beyond the physical control of the body will not only enhance health but also stimulate personal awareness.

Environmental dance therapy integrates interdisciplinary advantages of dance studies, psychology, and environmental science. It releases emotions and repairs human psychology through the interaction between the body and the environment, revealing its scientific principles for promoting mental health (Yuan Z, 2025). The concept has been internationally recognized as a healing paradigm and is highly compatible with modern mental health and well being needs (Klaperski-van der Wal S et al, 2025). The standardization construction of the industry is also lagging behind, and there is currently no unified dance therapy professional qualification certification system. The service processes and efficacy evaluation methods of different institutions vary greatly. This lack of standardization not only confuses service recipients when choosing, but also affects the professional credibility of environmental dance therapy and restricts its further promotion in the field of mental health. Non-linguistic dance movements bypass cultural differences and barriers in language communication, becoming a medium for emotional resonance between individuals from different backgrounds, and helping to build harmonious interpersonal relationships and social support networks (Yuan Z, 2025). The implementation of any form of structured dance is generally more effective than other types of structured exercise which improves a range of psychological and cognitive outcomes (Yan A.F., 2024).

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Conflict of Interest

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