

Rhythms of Power with Indian Classical Dance: Transforming Girls into Leaders

Tanaya Rao

Founder, www.girlmpower.org

Abstract- India is projected to become the second-largest economy by 2050 (PwC, The World in 2050)¹, with a GDP target of \$6 trillion by 2030². Achieving this requires providing all citizens with quality education and skills, especially ensuring 100% literacy among girls. However, UNICEF highlights that girls in India are significantly more likely to miss out on schooling. In a patriarchal society with cultural constraints, physical activity among girls remains critically low—only 3% among women (ICMR-INDIAB)³—jeopardizing their long-term health (Fiona Bull, WHO)⁴. Additionally, women occupy just 11% of leadership roles in India, compared to the global average of 27.3%⁵. This study emphasizes fostering the healthy development of girls by integrating Indian classical dance as a culturally resonant tool for holistic and inclusive leadership growth.

Keywords— Dance, Bharatanatyam, Classical Art, Leadership, Women, Girl Children, Empowerment, Health, Physical Activity, Development, Cognitive.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. India's challenge on women leadership

Around 92% of businesses in Asia lack capable leaders to effectively guide their organizations⁶. As more women enter the workforce, developing leadership talent is essential for India's projected rise to the second-largest economy by 2050. Nurturing leadership skills in girls from an early age is crucial to addressing this gap and ensuring sustainable growth.

B. Societal Challenges

In India's patriarchal society, girls and women are often not seen as natural leaders, leading to the disregard of their leadership potential in daily life. Social and economic disparities, particularly among women and children in marginalized communities, have resulted in widespread malnutrition. Additionally, cultural discrimination contributes to high dropout rates among girls and restricts their physical activity due to societal norms. These barriers not only hinder their health and education but also cause India to miss a critical opportunity to cultivate inclusive female leadership,

essential for driving GDP growth and fostering innovation.

II. LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES, APPROACH

This section explores various leadership styles, along with the essential skills, competencies, and strengths required for success in each style. It highlights the significance of cognitive skills, executive functions, and key leadership qualities and traits. Executive functions emphasize both short-term value creation and long-term strategic vision, similar to the role of a CEO. In contrast, leaders often focus on achieving immediate results. However, great leaders aspire to evolve into executives, balancing both strategic direction and operational outcomes to drive sustainable success.

A. Leadership Styles

Successful leaders understand how to adapt their leadership style based on the situation to effectively motivate their teams. According to IMD, six common leadership styles⁷ are used to describe various approaches to guiding teams, each with a distinct operating philosophy:

- **Transformational Leadership**
Focuses on future vision, driving change, and inspiring people.
- **Delegative Leadership**
Emphasizes delegation with minimal oversight and avoids micromanagement.
- **Authoritative Leadership**
Builds strong relationships with the team, promoting a "follow me" approach.
- **Transactional Leadership**
Operates through structure, processes, and procedure-driven management.
- **Participative Leadership**
Encourages openness, active listening, and team collaboration in decision-making.
- **Servant Leadership**
Prioritizes empowering the team, fostering ethical behavior, and serving others.

B. Cognitive Skills

Cognitive skills are fundamental brain functions used for reading, thinking, learning, and reasoning, focusing attention, and remembering. These abilities determine an individual's capacity to acquire and process information. Cognitive psychology, the scientific study of mental processes⁸, focuses on seven key areas: 1) attention, 2) language use, 3) memory, 4) perception, 5) problem-solving, 6) creativity, and 7) reasoning. These skills are essential for building knowledge and navigating complex tasks.

C. Executive Functions (EF)

Executive functions are advanced cognitive skills that guide a person's ability to manage their thoughts, behaviors, and actions. Widely used in the business context, they serve as key indicators of an executive or leader's capacity to perform tasks efficiently and effectively. These skills also play a crucial role in predicting academic success, particularly in math and reading, throughout the school years⁹.

Key executive functions include:

- Self-Control – Regulating impulses and responses.
- Self-Monitoring – Assessing and adjusting one's performance.
- Emotional Control – Managing emotions in various situations.
- Flexibility – Adapting to changing circumstances.
- Task Initiation – Starting tasks without procrastination.
- Organization – Structuring information and resources.
- Working Memory – Retaining and using information for tasks.
- Planning & Time Management – Setting goals and managing time effectively.

D. Leadership Qualities

The traits and behaviors developed by girls through learning and performing Indian classical dance align closely with essential leadership qualities¹⁰:

- Integrity - Demonstrating honesty and commitment to the success of the program.
- Delegation - Assigning responsibilities to the right dancer at the right time.
- Communication - Effectively conveying messages through both verbal and non-verbal (body) expressions to the team and audience.

- Self-Awareness - Maintaining sharp focus and a deep understanding of oneself.
- Gratitude - Expressing appreciation for opportunities to perform and grow.
- Agility - Embracing continuous learning and improvement through consistent practice.
- Influence & Mentorship - Guiding, mentoring, and coaching junior members to build team strength.
- Empathy - Building emotional connections with the team, fostering inclusivity and support.
- Courage - Being authentic, standing up for oneself and the team when needed.
- Respect - Honoring cultural values, work ethics, gurus, and mentors.

III. ART OF DANCE: A PLASIBLE SOLUTINO FOR HOLISTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

A. Indian Classical Dance:

Indian classical dance transcends cultural expression, fitness, and health, playing a transformative role in shaping girls into confident, courageous leaders. It fosters qualities such as adaptability, quick learning, team building, inclusivity, trustworthiness, and empathy. Beyond its artistic value, dance alleviates stress, promotes physical well-being, sharpens focus, and strengthens cognitive function.

Leadership Styles on and off the stage:

In group dancing, dancers must be inclusive, work collaboratively, and adhere to a structured framework (both physical and musical). They need to observe and listen to their teammates to anticipate their next move, while also empowering others to either lead or follow the rhythm. Dancers must think ahead, planning their next steps, entrances, exits, and positioning throughout the performance. Each dancer wears different leadership styles with confidence, knowing that the success of the program depends on the collective effort. Every team member is accountable, as a single mistake can disrupt the theme and outcome.

In solo performances, dancers adopt an authoritative leadership style, as all attention is on them, and their success is entirely dependent on their ability to perform. Overall, girl dancers experience a range of leadership styles, gaining valuable insights into how different approaches can be applied in both life and career.

Cognitive Skills driving the flow:

Indian classical dance demands an understanding of the song’s language and meaning, which guides the dance and the positioning of movements. Dancers must memorize the lyrics and the sequence of steps, stay attentive, and visualize the stage dimensions to ensure they land in the correct positions throughout the performance. All cognitive skills must work in harmony with body movements, allowing the dancer to seamlessly execute the routine while maintaining focus and precision.

Executive Functions building behaviors:

Dancing helps develop emotional expression and control, while fostering discipline in oneself, the team, planning, time management, memorization, and analytical thinking. It also teaches flexibility, as dancers must take on various characters, positions, and roles in different performances. Through dance, one learns to listen actively, remain open to coaching, and embrace lifelong learning. Additionally, dancers are often called upon to mentor junior performers, further developing their leadership and executive functions.

B. Leadership Qualities:

The traits and executive behaviors developed by girls through learning and performing Indian classical dance include:

- Integrity: Demonstrating the highest standards of honesty and commitment to program success.
- Delegation: Assigning responsibilities to the right dancer at the appropriate moment.
- Communication: Effectively expressing ideas through both verbal and non-verbal communication with the team and audience.
- Self-Awareness: Maintaining sharp focus and understanding of oneself.
- Gratitude: Showing appreciation for the opportunity to perform.
- Agility in Learning: Embracing continuous growth and improvement through consistent practice.
- Influence & Mentorship: Guiding, influencing, and coaching junior dancers.
- Empathy: Emotionally connecting with the team, the performance, and fostering inclusivity.
- Courage: Being authentic, standing up for oneself and the team, and taking initiative.
- Respect: Honoring cultural traditions, work ethics, gurus, and mentors.

IV. METHODOLOGY

To assess the leadership qualities, cognitive skills, and executive functions developed through Indian classical dance training and performances, a survey was conducted focusing on the cognitive and executive functions of girls enrolled in Indian classical dance institutions and participating in amateur performances.

Sample size: 327

Segmentation: 7 dance groups, 11-14 students per group

Total Surveys Received: 2,986

Participants: Dance academy students, peers at dance academy, peers at school/extra circular. Parents/legal-guardians rating of their own children; instructors, teaching assistants, mentors assigned to students.

Table 1: Demographic Details of Participants

Participant Type	Quantity	Gender	Age Range
Student	89	Female	11-18
Peer	98	Female/Male*	9-18
Teacher/Mentor	13	Female	15-46
Mother	67	Female	28-52
Father	39**	Male	28-61
Legal Guardian (grandparents, aunt/uncle)	12***	Female/Male	68-75
*Peers who are boys at school, extracirculliar activities etc.			
Not all fathers willing to participate as they see dance is gender related			
Legal guardians (grandparents) jointly filled single survey			

The survey includes a diverse group of respondents, such as peers from outside the dance academy (e.g., tennis teammates or school buddies), mentors primarily assigned to younger student groups, fathers, and legal guardians like grandparents. This approach helps capture a broader range of skills, behaviors, and leadership potential, reflecting real-life scenarios and growth.

While the student sample size increased, there was a notable rise in mother participation in the third year of the survey, as they aligned with the findings and hypotheses from the previous two years. Interestingly, grandparents who serve as caregivers provided additional insights beyond the survey. We observed a positive impact on father participation, though it remained around 50% despite this being their first time taking part in the survey.

Table 2: Summary of Cognitive Skills Survey

Skill Category	Initial Rating	End-Year 1 Rating	End-Year 2 Rating	End-Year 3 Rating
Attention	5	7	8	8
Language Use	4	6	7	8
Memory	4	6	7	8
Perception	3	4	7	8
Problem Solving	4	5	6	9
Creativity	4	6	7	9
Reasoning	2	4	5	7

There was a significant improvement in the problem-solving and creativity skills of girl students by year 3, although their reasoning skills have not yet reached their peak. Practical experience, attention to detail, performances, and teamwork have not only helped them become natural leaders but also played a key role in enhancing their cognitive abilities. Notably, we observed greater improvement across all age groups where parents and caregivers are college graduates, as they are better equipped to guide their children toward success.

Since cognitive skills are closely linked to social and real-world situations, it is clear that training in Indian classical dance at this institute over a 3-year period has contributed to a remarkable 223% improvement in the cognitive skills of the girl students.

Table 3: Executive Functions Survey Summary

Skill Category	Initial Rating	End-Year 1 Rating	End-Year 2 Rating	End-Year 3 Rating
Self-control	3	6	7	8
Emotional control	3	6	7	7
Task Initiation	4	6	8	8
Working Memory	4	6	8	8
Self-Monitor	3	5	6	8
Flexibility	2	6	8	9
Organization	2	4	7	9
Planning & Time Mgt.	3	5	8	9

Flexibility, organizational skills, and time management reached their peak during the 3-year period, while emotional control remained consistent with the observation from year 2. As the students matured, engaged in more group work, and participated in additional performances, they developed into effective planners, becoming more independent and able to deliver flawless performances. Over the course of three years, we observed an impressive 450% improvement in time management, as well as in their ability to manage themselves and others.

V. CONCLUSION

Our 3-year study demonstrates that girls who were once introverted, struggled with stage fear, lacked freedom of expression, and faced societal pressures,

have transformed into strong, confident, passionate, courageous, empathetic, and agile leaders of tomorrow. With the support of families who believed in and empowered their daughters, we saw significant progress in shaping their futures. Indian classical dance, rooted in the art of Indian culture, plays a pivotal role in fostering this growth. It empowers today's girls and women to become the future executives and visionary leaders, accelerating the collective vision of India, the world, and the United Nations Girl Up foundation.

REFERENCES

- [1] The long view: how will the global economic order change by 2050? The World in 2050: PwC
- [2] 100% girl-child literacy a priority to build a \$6 trillion economy 100% girl-child literacy a priority to build a \$6 trillion economy (livemint.com)
- [3] Only 3% women exercise in India.
- [4] <https://thefederal.com/health/study-claims-only-3-women-in-india-work-out-regularly/>
- [5] Over 80% adolescents globally lack sufficient physical activity: WHO
- [6] Women Hold 17% Of Board Positions In Corporate India, But Only 11% Leadership Roles - Forbes India Blogs
- [7] Only 7.2% of businesses in Asia have prepared leaders: Report - The Economic Times (indiatimes.com)
- [8] <https://www.imd.org/reflections/leadership-styles/>
- [9] American Psychological Association. Glossary of psychological terms". Apa.org. Retrieved 2023-07-09.
- [10] Browse by c – APA Dictionary of Psychology
- [11] Gathercole SE, Pickering SJ, Knight C, Stegmann Z. Working memory skills and educational attainment: evidence from National Curriculum assessments at 7 and 14 years of age. Appl. Cogn. Psychol. 2004;18:1–16.
- [12] <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/10-characteristics-of-a-good-leader-action-guide-center-for-creative-leadership.pdf>