

Reviving the Indian tradition of music therapy

What if the music we hear has therapeutic effects. What if it cures us of our diabetes and prevents the possibilities of numerous other diseases. Sanak Kumar Athreya and his wife Sowmya Sanak explored and expounded the applications of music beyond entertainment through their discourse “Nada Swasthi – An Indian Method of Musical Therapy”. It was held at Jain University on June 2015 as a part of the “Knowledge talk” series organised by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Jain University.

Sanak and Sowmya are on a mission to revive the therapeutic aspects of music. They started their lecture by elucidating the current outlook towards knowledge. Today, knowledge is limited to product or domain knowledge. It is not all-encompassing as it used to be. One needs to go back to the age-old tradition of “Yo muktaye sa Vidya – knowledge is the tool by which we attain equanimity of mind” to attain “Swasthi – wellbeing”. The concept harks back to the Vedic age where equanimity of mind could be achieved through the knowledge of Music and Yoga.

The ideological difference in the approach towards knowledge between the new and the old is evident in the field of medicine. Allopathy prescribes the cure for a disease only after a particular condition develops. It aims to control or suppress symptoms via medicine, and the root cause of the illness is not identified. In Ayurveda, the main objective is to remove the root cause. There are multiple ways of healing and treatment is available at all levels of existence. One such important limb of Ayurveda is “Nada Swasthi”, which is divided into Nada Yoga the preventive and fitness-driven part, and Nada Chikitsa, the curative arm.

Sanak and Sowmya elaborated on Nada Chikitsa. It is based on the Ayurvedic approaches of Yuktivyapasraya (based on logic), Daivavyapasrayaya (based on karma), and Sattvavajaya (based on mind). The texts of Sangeetha, Yoga, and Ayurveda are combined to find many applications for Naada Chikitsa. Sanak and Sowmya have successfully used music in Speech Therapy, Behaviour Therapy and Physiotherapy. In Speech Therapy a specific musical syllabus has been charted out with the practise of music in mind. Regular practise of specific syllables improved the verbal ability of practitioners. Behaviour therapy involves playing pleasant and exultant music to depression patients and thereby making a gradual change in their condition. Physiotherapy aims at integrating the movement of a specific body part, which is impaired (e.g., the thumb) by developing and designing musical instruments which serves this purpose.

Apart from these aspects, music has also been found to improve cognition in students. Reading while playing music in the background has yielded positive results in the form of improved reading speeds and cognition. Sanak and Sowmya capped off their lecture by demonstrating their own indigenous PVC version of the Didgeridoo (an Australian wind instrument), which improves the respiratory functions of the body and is the only known cure for snoring (sleep apnoea). The students of Humanities and Social Sciences and the audience present for the talk were enlightened by scholastic expertise of Sanak and Sowmya. They rendered shlokas from Sanskrit and played music to imprint their points upon the audience. The talk was followed by a lively question and answer session, which gave the students and the audience an opportunity to interact with the talented couple.