

Rabindra Sangeet and Special Needs Individuals with Emphasis on their Problem Behaviours

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Abstract

Music has,undeniably, a positive and conducive impact on the perturbed human mind. Using this very trait of this art form, the therapists all over the world treat their patients with music through music therapy. Rabindrasangeet, the songs written by Rabindranath Tagore (the poet laureate) mainly in Bengali and later translated in different languages of India and the world, is a very popular form of music among the Bengalis in the eastern part of India. It is often used to treat patients with mental disorders like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) through the already established therapy called Rabindrik Psychotherapy. However, till date, there exists no such treatment to reduce the anxiety level and modify the problem behavioursof special needs individuals. The researchers conducted 3 case studies of three special needs individuals based in Kolkata and Mumbai, India. Owing to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, they carried out semi-structured telephonic interviews of the mothers (primary caregivers) of these individuals, a private music teacher, a special educator and two music teachers attached to a special school in Kolkata to investigate the impact of Rabindrasangeeton the problem behaviours of these challenged individuals. It was found out that the soothing tune of this genre does play a positive role in bringing down the anxiety level and problem behaviours like self-hitting, self-biting, aggression etc. These individuals experience a calming effect on their mind and a subtle joy while listening to Rabindrasangeet and exhibit socially acceptable behaviours.

Keywords:*Rabindrasangeet, Special needs individuals, Problem behaviours, Music therapy, RabindrikPsychotherapy*

Introduction

According to Shakespeare, music is “such art” that dispels the “grief of heart” (*Henry VIII*) or “music oft hath such a charm/ To make bad good...” (*Measure for Measure*). It is universally acknowledged that music has a beneficial impact on the human mind and behaviour. Naturally, this

art form, consisting of sound and rhythm, has been employed all over the world to soothe the perturbed human mind and modify human behaviour through music therapy.

Several studies have been conducted across the world pertaining to music and its positive influence on individuals with challenges (both physical and mental) and individuals with typical development. In the paper “Use of Music in Special Education and Application Examples from Turkey”, Eren (2013) cited an example where 4 pre-school kids with autism learned various concepts pertaining to colours and emotions after being exposed to music activities twice a week for a year. Batabura&Maniam (2019) in their work “Enhancing Creativity through Musical Drama for Children with Special Needs Down Syndrome in Education of Disabled Children” found out that musical drama could improve language skills, communication skills, memory and storage of information in children with Down Syndrome. Again, Stratford & Ching (1989) in their study “Responses to music and movement in the development of children with Down’s Syndrome”, pointed out that music and dance movements had a congenial impact on the development of the special needs children. Bharathi, Venugopal &Vellingiri (2019) in their work “Music therapy as a therapeutic tool in improving the social skills of autistic children” revealed that music therapy for three months could improve the social skills of the 54 children with mild to severe autism (taken as sample) such that they could communicate, understand, respond and interact with their peers in a better way. Jellison& Gainer (1995) conducted a case study of a child with special needs for one year in both music education and music therapy settings to examine the special child’s behaviour. They concluded that music therapy produced better result than music education. Rates of individual correct responses were higher in music therapy than in music education. However, in both cases, the child exhibited less aggressive behaviour as compared to non-musical environment. Mitchell, E. (2016) revealed that English music therapists accepted that musical experiences in the form of therapeutic music education produced personal growth along with musical growth in their clients. In the book titled *Music Therapy in Schools: Working with Children of All Ages in Mainstream and Special Education*(2012), Bruce, A. & High, S. in Chapter 4 (Multiple Views of Music Therapy), have talked about a 5-year-old girl with cerebral palsy and severe learning disabilities. She does not use any language and whose exposure to music in her school in therapeutic setting improves her vocalisation, interaction and communication skills. Again, Daveson& Edwards (1998) revealed the wide use of music in medical and educational institutions, both special and regular, in Australia. Berger, D.S. (2002) has shown very aptly that music therapy is, indeed, very effective for children with autism spectrum disorder because communication with these children via music works better than communication through words. Berger also mentions that music stimulates the brain to produce remarkable results. Lloyd, P. in his book *Let’s All Listen: Songs for Group Work in Settings That Include Students with Learning Difficulties and Autism* (2007), has compiled 46 songs for especially children with special needs who have problems in communication, based on the principle that music improves and enhances the communication skills and social interaction in students with learning difficulties.

The use of Rabindrasangeetinmusic therapy

Rabindrasangeet is a very popular form of music in Eastern India. It is a body of songs written by the poet laureate, Rabindranath Tagore (the first Asian to win a Nobel Prize in literature in 1913). The songs are written mainly in Bengali that depict the entire gamut of human emotions. Almost every Bengali is fond of this unique genre. Whether in deep agony, sorrow, joy or ecstasy, the Bengali

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heart clings on to Rabindrasangeet. Naturally, this Bengali art form has also been adopted for promotion of mental health and well-being among individuals in Rabindrik Psychotherapy, an already established therapy for treating patients with mental disorders. In “Effectiveness of Rabindra Sangeet and Rabindra Nritya on level of stress among mothers of children with ASD” (2020, February), Mandal, Mondal & Bishnuroy have shown that by exposing the mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder to Rabindrasangeet, the stress level could be reduced. They have opined that Rabindrasangeet are the eternal songs created by Tagore that act as a mediator “to feel deeply the inner and inner core of consciousness”. Acharya & Tarafdar (2019) conducted a research (tools used: a close-ended questionnaire and Beck Depression Inventory) and found that the songs of Tagore drove away tension and depression and lowered the anxiety level among the 200 adolescents of both the genders, aged between 16 and 18 years. In another work titled “Study of the effect of music on HRV signal using 3D Poincare plot in spherical coordinates-A signal processing approach” (2015), Das et al. have revealed that Rabindrasangeet may be used as a tool to deal with different medical problems such as stress management or hypertension. **But can Rabindrasangeet be equally effective in reducing the problem behaviours of special needs individuals?**

Objective: To investigate whether Rabindrasangeet reduces the problem behaviours of special needs individuals.

Rabindrasangeet and its impact on special needs individuals

Special needs individuals constitute one of the most marginalised sections of the society in India. According to William Radice, the British poet, writer and translator who has studied the mood and melody of Tagore’s songs, **it is difficult for anyone to ignore Tagore’s songs** [as mentioned by Sugandha, T. (2020, June) in “Tagore and Music Therapy”]. The researchers, thus, have attempted to find out the impact of Rabindrasangeet on the problem behaviours of the special needs individuals, which hamper their learning process, through **case studies of 3 individuals with special needs (cerebral palsy, ASD and PDD-NOS)**, based in Kolkata and Mumbai, India.

Owing to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic situation, the researchers conducted semi-structured telephonic interviews of mothers (primary caregivers) of 3 individuals with special needs, a music teacher imparting private music lessons to one of these special needs individuals at the learner’s home and a special educator and 2 music teachers attached to a special school in Kolkata.

Case study#1: The teenager from Kolkata who loves to sing and dance to the tunes of Rabindrasangeet

This 14-year-old-girl with cerebral palsy from Kolkata is wheelchair bound and attends both a special school (run by a Non-Governmental Organisation) and a government mainstream (normal) school in the city. The mother sends her to the government school twice a week after attending the special school mainly to avail the benefits, especially monetary, that her daughter is eligible for. Presently, she is at the B-level (equivalent to standard 5) under NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling) in the special school. The mother reveals that her daughter has a good memory and loves counting numbers backward both in English and Bengali (mother-tongue). She has speech problem of moderate degree and problem in fine-motor too. Thus, she takes the help of her mother while writing. She had a convulsion attack after birth. At the age of six, she suffered from convulsion several times. After that she has not experienced any. The mother believes that homeopathy

treatment has stopped these convulsion attacks. However, she is presently not under any medication. Observing her inclination for music, especially Rabindrasangeet that her mother used to sing and play on the harmonium at home, the mother hired a private music teacher two years ago. The teacher comes home and conducts a class every week for one hour. The teacher reports that her special needs student enjoys her music classes and even starts dancing in her own way by clapping the hands when certain songs of Tagore are sung to her accompanied by a harmonium. According to the teacher, she does not adopt any special technique for giving music lessons to her challenged student. All she does is playing the songs of her student's liking several times so that she makes an effort to sing them. And she does make every effort to utter the lyrics. She loves singing "Aloamaaraloogoalobhubonbhora..." (Light O my light! This world is full of light...) and "Amrashobai raja amadereirajarrajottay..." (We are all kings in our king's kingdom...). The mother sent the researchers a video clipping in which she is seen trying her very best to sing the latter. During the lockdown in 2020, she attended online music classes happily every week for nearly an hour. Unlike the school online classes, she would sit all alone and sing with the teacher during the virtual music classes. Both the teacher and the mother are of the view that she waits eagerly for her music classes. Though she does not understand the inner meanings of these songs, yet she likes their tunes, rhythms and beats. She prefers the rhythmic songs of Tagore to the slow-paced ones. She memorises the lyrics quite well. The mother opines that music, especially Rabindrasangeet, has a constructive impact on her daughter. It definitely reduces her anxiety level and problem behaviours. The mother takes recourse to playing Rabindrasangeet on cell phone whenever she has to leave the daughter unattended for her household chores. The daughter sits quietly and listens to the songs. Otherwise, she messes up the whole place trying to do things on her own. Also, according to the mother, while learning the lyrics and attempting to utter them, her speech has improved to a considerable degree.

Case study#2: The young man from Mumbai with a keyboard

This 21-year-old young man with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from Mumbai understands both Bengali, his mother-tongue, and Hindi, the language of instruction in school. He studied in a mainstream school in Mumbai till class 12 and completed higher secondary examination under NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling). Presently he goes to a vocational centre. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic scenario, he is staying indoors and learning computers online. The mother says that he has been learning keyboard since he was 8 years old. The music teacher, a non-Bengali, comes home to give him lessons on keyboard playing. The mother reveals that her son, though verbal, does not converse spontaneously. His communication through spoken words is only need based. However, he has a strong liking for music. He listens to different genres of music including Rabindrasangeet and plays them on his keyboard at a specific time (between 4.30pm and 5pm) during the evening. This gives him satisfaction and also calms him down when in anxiety. However, according to the mother, he is not hyperactive. The mother points out that whenever her son experiences high anxiety level he starts playing the keyboard to soothe his disturbed mind. Though he does not prefer the melancholic tunes of certain Rabindrasangeet, he likes the 'happy' songs by Tagore which have beats and are rhythmic. In fact, he switches off the sad numbers by Tagore. The mother recalls that her son, at the age of 3 years, used to cry the whole day and then it was music particularly the Rabindrasangeet: "Akash bhora /Shurjotara..." (The sky full of sun and stars...) that played a great role in calming him down. It played a significant role in reducing and modifying his problem behaviour of crying

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and throwing tantrums. At present, the father plays Rabindrasangeet besides Western classical like Mozart during night. Such a musical environment, as pointed out by the mother, has a positive effect on her son's overall mental health and keeps his anxiety and stress level low. The mother says that her son is under homeopathic medication which she opines has no side effects as such and it gives her peace of mind because there is no cure for ASD as of now. On contacting the mother two months after the interview, the researchers learnt that both the mother and her son were down with COVID. So, no further communication could be made.

Case study#3: The young man from Kolkata who loves singing and listening to Rabindrasangeet

This 21-year-old Bengali young man from Kolkata exhibits certain traits of autism and has been diagnosed with PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified). He has delayed developmental milestones and balance problem while walking. He wears a pair of leather-made special shoes to school, given by the school authority. He has flat feet and these shoes aid him in stepping and climbing up the staircase. The mother reveals that right from the age of 1 year 3 months, her son experienced several convulsion attacks that worsened her condition. That last convulsion was when he was 11 years old. Presently he takes 3 types of neurological medicine at different times of the day. Though verbally, he is quite strong, yet he has severe fine motor problem and cannot write. He does not show any interest in functional academics and is at pre-vocational level in the special school that he attends in the southern fringes of the city. However, he has a strong liking for music. The mother, a trained singer, is of the view that he has inherited his love for music from the family, in which every member sings and takes keen interest in music and Tagore's songs. The family runs a music school too. This young man loves to sing the very popular Rabindrasangeet: "Puranoshei diner kathabhulbiki re hai..." (How can you forget the memories of yesterday?/...). The mother says that most of the time she has observed him singing this song when sitting alone. He also likes to sing "Boroasha kore eshechhi go kachhe deke lou..." (I have come to you with great hope, so take me close to you, mother...). He possesses a very sharp memory, remembers the lyrics very well and even identifies the songs by their tunes. When unable to sing tunefully some of Tagore's difficult songs, he simply utters the lyrics as in poetry. The mother points out that he does this for the song "Choronodhoritediyo go amare, nionanionashoraye..." (Let me hold your feet, don't move them away...). The mother sent a video clipping to the researchers in which he is seen singing the Rabindrasangeet: "Agunerporoshmonichhowaoprane ..." (Touch my life with the fiery magical stone and purify my life...). She thinks that her son understands the meaning of these songs to a certain extent. At the age of ten, when he caught his mother crying and singing a sad song by Tagore, after his grandmother's demise, he asked her whether she was singing it out of pain and remorse due to his grandmother's absence.

During the lockdown of 2020, he became hyperactive and aggressive and it was singing of Rabindrasangeet that significantly reduced his heightened anxiety level (caused due to the abrupt changes in his daily routine). Consequently, his problem behaviours like pinching others, hurling verbal abuses at others and repeatedly saying the same thing also have got reduced. Now he has adapted himself to the 'new normal' and attends online classes for two hours thrice a week. A talkative person that he is, he enjoys talking to his friends and teachers during the virtual classes. The problem behaviours, the mother points out, arise out of anger, frustration and inability to express himself fully in spite of being verbal. During the hot summer days, when he usually becomes

hyperactive, the mother takes recourse to singing of Rabindrasangeet that has considerably a soothing and positive impact on her son's mind.

The special educator and the two music teachers attached to a special school in Kolkata

This special educator, dealing with individuals with special needs for more than 13 years, is of the view that exposing special needs individuals of varied age groups to soothing music actually calms down their anxiety level. It works well in reducing their problem behaviours, especially in the case of autistic individuals, and also improves their communication skills. So, in her school, the very first thing that the music teachers, in collaboration with the special educators, try to play are some Rabindrasangeet in the music classes. Tagore's songs, by and large, are gentle and soothing. Besides, most of the students come from Bengali households who have been exposed to Tagore's songs at home environment in one or the other way. Most of them are quite familiar with this genre. She opines that exposure and familiarity matter. However, even if a student is not familiar with this genre or does not understand Bengali, by playing these songs repeatedly in every music class, the student develops a liking for it eventually. The soothing, gentle and lilting tunes of many of Tagore's songs appeal to them as they appeal to many individuals without special needs. Such tunes produce a calming effect on them when they get agitated and their anxiety level decreases eventually. The problem behaviours (resulting out of frustration and anger) like self-hitting, self-biting, hitting others, head banging, throwing tantrums etc. also get reduced. In the process, these individuals also start paying heed to the instruction given by the teacher. She opines that the student-teacher interaction level gets enhanced too. She, however, does not mention any special technique adopted by the music teachers in her school. The two music teachers in her school also talked to the researchers over the phone. They, too, have not made any mention of any specialised method while singing in the music classes of the special needs individuals. Repeated singing of the songs of the students' liking has proved beneficial and effective for the students. They are of the view that their students learn through repeated practice and habit formation.

Discussion

The present study is unique in its own way because till date no study has been conducted, in Indian or foreign context, to investigate the impact of Rabindrasangeet on the special needs individuals and their socially inappropriate problem behaviours. The studies by Mandal, Mondal & Bishnuroy (2020), Acharya & Tarafdar (2019) and Das et al. (2015) explored the effect of Rabindrasangeet on the stress level among the mothers of the autistic children, depressed adolescents and typically developing individuals respectively. These three studies found the songs of Tagore to be an effective tool in reducing stress level, anxiety level and hypertension among individuals with typical development. The studies did not include the special needs individuals. Again, unlike the present study, consisting of 3 case studies of 3 special needs individuals (cerebral palsy, ASD and PDD-NOS) of various age groups, Jellison & Garner (1995) carried out a single case study of a single challenged child to compare the child's behaviour in both musical and non-musical environments with the conclusion that less aggressive behaviours were exhibited in musical environment. The similarity lies at one point that both the studies deal with the impact of music (or songs) on the problem behaviours of individuals with special needs, one in the English context and the other in the Indian context. The only other study reviewed that deals with case study of a challenged individual is by Bruce & High [Chapter 4 (titled "Multiple Views of Music Therapy") of the book called *Music Therapy in Schools*]

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in which the authors revealed the improvement of vocalisation, interaction and communication skills of a 5-year-old girl with cerebral palsy and severe learning disabilities in the musical and therapeutical setting. The study by Batubara & Maniam also adopted a qualitative approach in which data were collected through observation of the teachers, principals and parents to investigate whether musical drama could improve communication skill and expression in Down Syndrome children. The other research works by Bharathi, Venugopal & Vellingiri (2019), Eren (2013) [both quasi experimental researches], Berger (2002), and Daveson & Edwards (1998)- all are related to finding out whether music therapy could enhance the communication skills, social interactions, cognitive functioning etc. in the challenged individuals through music therapy. None of these is concerned with **case studies** or impact of Rabindrasangeet, on the **problem behaviours of special needs individuals**, either in Indian or foreign context. Thus, the present study, undeniably, explores a novel area, precisely in the Indian context.

Conclusion

From the above case studies of the three special needs individuals of both genders (2 male and 1 female individuals), of various age groups, it can be inferred that Rabindrasangeet plays a positive role in reducing the socially inappropriate problem behaviours of the special needs individuals. The opinions and views expressed by the mothers of the 3 special needs individuals, a private music teacher and the special educator and the two other music teachers, attached to a special school in Kolkata, further strengthen this inference. That language is not a barrier as far, as music is concerned, is well-known. Thus, Rabindrasangeet or songs of Tagore can be used for modifying the socially unacceptable problem behaviours of the challenged individuals from both Bengali and non-Bengali background. Also, Debdulal Dutta Roy, the proponent of Rabindrik Psychotherapy, has aptly viewed: “Rabindrasangeet tunes (without the words) can help those who don’t understand Bengali” (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/rabindrasangeet-as-psychotherapy/articleshow/26489400.cms>). It may be pointed out that one need not actually understand the inner meanings and connotations lying within these songs as far as special needs individuals are concerned. The rhythm and the tunes matter a lot. Till date there exists no “well-structured, holistic curative procedure” (in the words of Dutta Roy) like Rabindrik Psychotherapy, as far as treating the challenged individuals with Rabindrasangeet is concerned. Still several special schools and special educators in Kolkata take recourse to this very genre of music so as to produce a positive and conducive effect on special needs individuals of various age groups and of both genders (male and female) to lessen their anxiety level, to reduce their problem behaviours and to help them manage their emotional disturbances. In fact, positive results are being obtained due to this practice and the music teachers and the special educators as well as the caregivers of the challenged individuals concede that soothing tunes of Tagore’s songs, indeed, are helpful for modifying the socially undesirable problematic behaviours of their pupils and wards, thereby enhancing their attention level and learning process. These problem behaviours come in the way of their learning and education.

It may be suggested that further wider researches may be conducted in this field. Seminars, workshops and conferences may be organized on this topic to widen the scope of Rabindrasangeet as a tool for behaviour modification of the special needs individuals across India and other countries of the world. The many facets of Tagore’s songs have already been explored. With the present study

another new facet of Rabindrasangeet has been explored. The researchers are optimistic that in the near future an established treatment through this popular genre and trained therapists will take shape that will be beneficial for the special needs individuals, who have largely remained neglected in the Indian society.

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