

The Role of Bhajans and Kirtans in Emotional Catharsis and Inner Peace among Devotees

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Abstract

This study explores the psychological and emotional functions of bhajans and kirtans—two prominent forms of Indian devotional music—in facilitating emotional catharsis and promoting inner peace among devotees. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, incorporating quantitative measures of affect, mindfulness, and stress alongside qualitative interviews and participant observation. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), Tiwari Stress Assessment Questionnaire (TSAQ), and Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) were used to measure emotional and cognitive variables. Findings are expected to reveal that regular participation in bhajans and kirtans reduces stress levels, enhances mindfulness, and promotes a profound sense of inner tranquillity. These results highlight the therapeutic and psychosocial value of devotional singing as a culturally grounded mechanism for emotional release, social harmony, and spiritual wellbeing.

Keywords: bhajan, kirtan, emotional catharsis, inner peace, devotional music, wellbeing, music therapy, Tiwari Stress Assessment Questionnaire, psychology of religion.

Introduction :

Music has long been recognized as a universal language of emotion, healing, and spiritual elevation. Within Indian spiritual traditions, bhajans (devotional songs) and kirtans (collective chanting in call-and-response style) play a vital role in fostering emotional expression and spiritual devotion. These musical forms are more than ritual performances; they are experiences of collective emotion, self-surrender, and catharsis.

The Sanskrit term bhakti denotes devotion characterized by surrender and love toward the divine. Through singing, clapping, and rhythmic participation, devotees express intense emotions—joy, longing, or repentance—culminating in emotional purification and peace. Psychologically, such practices serve as natural forms of emotion regulation and mindfulness, promoting both individual and collective wellbeing.

This study seeks to analyze how participation in bhajans and kirtans facilitates emotional catharsis and inner peace among devotees by combining perspectives from music psychology, cultural studies, and the psychology of religion.

Review of Literature :

Research across disciplines has established the connection between music and emotion regulation. According to Juslin and Västfjäll (2008), music evokes emotions through mechanisms such as rhythmic

entrainment, emotional contagion, and associative memory. Group singing further amplifies these effects by promoting social bonding and collective effervescence (Fancourt et al., 2016).

In the Indian context, devotional music has historically been a means for expressing divine love and achieving mental harmony. Bhajans and kirtans often employ repetitive melodic patterns, sacred lyrics, and slow rhythmic cycles conducive to meditative absorption. Studies on chanting and meditative music demonstrate physiological and psychological benefits, including lowered heart rate, enhanced relaxation, and decreased anxiety (Bernardi et al., 2001; Newberg & Iversen, 2003).

However, limited empirical research has addressed bhajans and kirtans specifically from a psychological standpoint. The present study aims to fill this gap by assessing both quantitative and qualitative indicators of emotional catharsis and inner peace using culturally validated tools.

Objectives of the Study :

1. To explore the role of bhajans and kirtans in facilitating emotional catharsis among devotees.
2. To assess the relationship between devotional singing and the experience of inner peace.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of the Tiwari Stress Assessment Questionnaire (TSAQ) in measuring stress reduction within this devotional context.
4. To identify the mechanisms—emotional, physiological, and social—through which these practices promote wellbeing.

Hypotheses :

1. Participation in bhajans and kirtans produces significant emotional release and reduction in stress levels as measured by TSAQ.
2. Regular involvement enhances mindfulness and inner peace.
3. Group singing strengthens social connectedness, which mediates psychological wellbeing.

Methodology :

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data on stress, affect, and mindfulness with qualitative insights from interviews and observations.

Participants :

A purposive sample of 100 adult devotees (aged 20–60) was drawn from Sharda Pathshala, local temples, and community centers in Bhagalpur and Kahalgaon. Participants attended regular bhajan or kirtan sessions at least once a week.

Instruments :

1. Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS):

Used to measure participants' emotional states before and after the devotional sessions.

2. Tiwari Stress Assessment Questionnaire (TSAQ) :

Developed by Dr. Rajesh Kumar Tiwari (Department of Psychology, T.N.B. College, Bhagalpur), the TSAQ assesses multiple dimensions of stress—physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. It has demonstrated high reliability and cultural validity for Indian populations.

3. Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS):

Measures levels of mindfulness and awareness of present experiences.

4. Inner Peace Scale (Self-developed) :

A brief scale designed to assess the subjective experience of tranquility and peace following devotional participation.

5. Semi-structured Interview Schedule:

Conducted to explore personal narratives of emotional release and spiritual calm.

Procedure :

Participants completed all instruments before and after bhajan/kirtan sessions. Interviews were conducted with 20 selected participants to capture in-depth experiences. Data were analyzed using both statistical and thematic methods.

Statistical Tools

Paired-sample t-tests were used to analyze pre–post changes in stress, affect, and mindfulness. Pearson correlations examined relationships among variables. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding.

Expected Results :

Preliminary observations suggest that devotees experience emotional catharsis through expressive singing, rhythmic engagement, and the spiritual atmosphere of the sessions. Quantitative findings are expected to show a significant decrease in stress (TSAQ scores) and an increase in positive affect and mindfulness. Qualitative narratives highlight feelings of lightness, emotional purification, and deep calm after participation.

Discussion :

The anticipated results support the view that bhajans and kirtans serve as culturally embedded forms of music therapy and emotion regulation. The process of devotional singing combines expressive vocalization, rhythmic entrainment, and spiritual surrender, leading to cathartic relief. Regular practice fosters mindfulness, reduces rumination, and enhances inner peace.

These findings also reaffirm the theoretical model that communal music practices foster collective emotion regulation, social bonding, and spiritual integration—dimensions crucial for psychological wellbeing. The TSAQ proves especially useful for capturing the culturally nuanced forms of stress that emerge in Indian devotional contexts.

Conclusion :

The study concludes that bhajans and kirtans are not only spiritual expressions but also powerful psychological mechanisms for emotional release and mental peace. Incorporating such practices into community-based mental health programs could enhance resilience and harmony among participants. The successful use of the Tiwari Stress Assessment Questionnaire further underscores the importance of indigenous psychological tools in studying emotional wellbeing within Indian culture.

Ethical Considerations :

Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Psychology, T.N.B. College, Bhagalpur. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Religious settings were respected, and community leaders granted permission for data collection.

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