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# DOC ON THE DANCE FLOOR

*Dance therapy is emerging as a unique treatment for Parkinson's disease*

Vilas Balakrishna Joshi is 61, and says he's never danced. Yet here he is, with two others his age, moving cautiously to Tina Turner's full-throated *Proud Mary*, outpaced by her rhythm but buoyed by the beat. But, what, you may ask, has induced a group of elderly, orthodox Maharashtrians to expel their inhibitions and hop to rock? Parkinson's Disease—not so much inducement as imperative.

"What Joshi and his fellow dancers—71-year-old VD Shinde and Ashwini Anant Dodwad ("60 running")—are practicing is Dance Movement Therapy (DMT)—a relatively new recuperative form in India that has been collecting credit abroad for a decade. Last July, a troupe in Pune thought to put DMT through

## HAPPY FEET

the motions of contemporary dance. It turned out to be a radical step.

"We were a contemporary dance company conducting classes and staging performances at cultural shows, but we also wanted to reach out to the community," says Hrishikesh Pawar, the 27-year-old dancer who owns and runs this company. It was when they came upon a documentary called *Dancing for PD* by the Brooklyn-based Mark Morris Dance Group that they were shown how. Mark Morris had pioneered the Dance for Parkinson's programme in 2002, where they choreographed a special module that takes peo-

ple with Parkinson's through a set of rhythmic movements.

In Pune, Pawar took up the protracted task of researching Parkinson's disease and the effects of dance on people ailing from it. He sought the expertise and logistical support of orthopaedic practitioners at the Sancheti Institute for Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation. And then one of his dancers, Maithily Bhupatkar, applied to the Mark Morris Company for a two-month internship. Schooled in the pathology and treatment of the disease by neurophysiologists, and then taught prescribed dance modules, Bhupatkar returned to Pune. Now that the groundwork had been done, they only had to convince ailing Indian men and women (all over 60) to give dance, moreover contemporary dance, a chance.

"We screened Morris's documentary for the Parkinson's Association of Pune—a body with 375 members—hoping the film would persuade people to enroll," says Bhupatkar. Consider this alternative physiotherapy that will arrest the decline of motor symp-

toms, they were advised. Word about this radical new treatment got around, and four signed up.

These were people who were either new, or habituated to the tremors, rigidity and attendant depression of the disease to varying degrees. They were already on the meds, physiotherapy, yoga, daily ambulation and decided it

**Ashwini Dodwad, a schoolteacher, offers proof of her recovery—jaggery laddoos. "My hands used to tremble so violently that I couldn't even make chapatis. Now I can even make puranpoli"**

wouldn't hurt to try this alternative. But it was still unlike anything else.

Classes were held twice a week in the basement of Sancheti at one of their physiotherapy studios called the Knee Club. The hospital dis-

patched interns to measure the rate of progress (if any) and to take over in case of emergencies like a falls.

The participants recognised Indian classical, folk, and even Bollywood moves, but the apparently random and at times even childish gestures within the contemporary canon was bewildering. But they persevered.

At the studio, Hrishikesh fires up his laptop and a prearranged set starts to play. An electronic beat taps a brisk rhythm but the dancers go at their own pace, beginning with basic pirouettes of the fist, sidestepping of the foot, arms wheeling—all done seated and to their coaches' counts and instructions in Marathi ("Stretch your arms like you've diving into water, raise your hands like you're removing your shirt").

The 71-year-old former income tax agent who has had Parkinson's for 11 years has only just joined class and needs Hrishikesh's steady hand over his to round his gestures. The others seem to complete the motions with little assistance. Once the



Prashant Nakwe

**STEPS TO RECOVERY** Patients of Parkinson's disease move to pop, gospel, classical music and even Marathi bhavgeet

participants have warmed up, they progress to movement across the floor, incrementally getting every joint into the act. Hrishikesh plays Western pop, gospel, classical, African percussion, and Marathi *bhavgeet*, coaxing them to sing the familiar lyrics of the latter for vocal exercise.

"The fluency of their movements has visibly improved; they are better able to maintain their balance, gait and control their motions," says Dr Rajas Deshpande, the

neurologist who has been mapping their progress. For their analysis, his interns have referred to the scales of physiotherapy to assess such parameters as balance, gait, speech, postural stability and emotional consistency. They are now compiling a study on the benefits of dance on patients with Parkinson's to present to academics.

At the end of the hour, the dancers look upbeat. "My mobility has improved by 50 per cent after this, and my (medi-

cine) doses have reduced by 25 per cent," vouches Joshi, who repeats the routine for two hours every day at home, along with yoga. Ashwini Dodwad, a schoolteacher, offers proof of her recovery—jaggery laddoos. "My hands used to tremble so violently that I couldn't even make chapatis. Now I can even make puranpoli," she chuckles. Shinde, who is at a more advanced stage of Parkinson's than the others, has been taking lessons from Baba Ramdev off the TV. His wife ac-

companies him to this class.

Although participants pay a moderate Rs 750 a month to the hospital for the use of its facilities, the class isn't full because many ageing people with Parkinson's don't have an escort to class. Many are afraid to venture out alone for fear of collapsing on the street. Many more are embarrassed to join a dance class at their age. But those who have taken the leap have now found their faith and, in some ways, even their freedom.