

Importance and Benefits of Pilates Exercise for Bharatanatyam Dancers

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Abstract

Bharatanatyam dance form is a mean of expression, a medium to connect people, it is an art form. In which a full development of several physical capacities is also needed, which turn Bharatanatyam into an artistic and athletic activity. Each movement has to be performed correctly, gracefully, slowly, with control, without apparently effort. Pilates' exercise emphasizes on these factors. When the experienced Bharatanatyam dancer performs, it is easy to admire the grace, accuracy, reliability and harmony of the whole movement. However, to give a tremendous performance, a dancer should be strong and flexible. This means that great performances pre-suppose a fully developed body where technique, aesthetics, and physical conditioning work together. Therefore to achieve excellence, Bharatanatyam dancers must learn how to be an artist and athlete. For this a dancer must take supplementary training. The biggest challenge in front of dance teachers, choreographers and researchers is- what kind of conditioning workout can be included in the training process? Which is the best exercise to improve muscular strength? How can balance and flexibility be optimally developed? And how can the risk of injury are reduced? The answer and convenient option are Pilates' exercises. Pilates is a mild, non-aerobic supplementary exercise. It lengthens and strengthens the muscles, and improves posture, without stressing the joints or the heart. The Pilates method integrates both physical and mental elements. The middle part of the paper presents principles of performing Pilates' exercises and profits using the Pilates method.

The aim of this research is to convey the similarities between Bharatanatyam dance form and Pilates, importance of Pilates exercise and its benefits for Bharatanatyam dancers. Researcher's advice, through her own experience, is to adopt Pilates' exercise in the routine of Bharatanatyam dancers to improve mindfulness, strength, stamina and most importantly reduce the risk of injury which can lead to a successful and long-lasting career.

Key words: Pilates, Bharatanatyam, Dancers, Injury prevention, supplementary training

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- Articles were obtained from clinical journals identified through online searches using the Google search engine and from primary sources found in the obtained published reports.
- The keyword searched was Pilates and dance.
- References are taken from the workbook by Mr. Chakraborty and Ms. Smita Patil-Pilates' exponent.
- Books by Pilates Exponents and dancers are taken in to the consideration.

Introduction:

“It's now widely accepted by dance researchers, clinicians and educators that supplementary training is an essential part of a dancer's success and longevity. Dance class alone cannot provide the required physical adaptations to ensure optimal performance and reduced risk of injury.” (1)

Bharatanatyam Dance has a complex movement that integrates both artistry and physicality equally. Bharatanatyam Dancers require the creativity and grace of an artist along with the strength and control of an athlete.

The pleasure of art is relished by the audience as well as by the artist only when body and mind both are integrated. The mind is the main ingredient when training in both Pilates and Bharatanatyam dance form. The mind is capable of allowing the body to do almost everything. After learning the basic technique, the body understands the core concepts of movement. With Pilates exercise, different movements can be taught, that allows the body to naturally move with ease, and tone. If the mind will understand the vocabulary of Pilates to its maximum capacity, the body can be trained properly.

“Pilates' classes are included within the timetable at most major dance colleges throughout the UK as a form of exercise that can improve a dancer's flexibility and strength and equally prevent injury.” (2)

Since Pilates requires Body – Mind coordination just like Bharatanatyam, the researcher presumed Pilates as a very effective exercise for Bharatanatyam dancers.

The researcher also feels that the Indian classical dance institutions should go for supplementary training and adopt Pilate's exercise for student's better posture, performance, to reduce risk of injury and for the extension of the career span.

Bharatanatyam:**BharataNatyam: origin and principles**

BharataNatyam is a classical dance form that originated as a temple dance in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, based on Bharata's Natyasastra. Devadasis performed it as part of the ritual worship known as dasi attam. It passed through the courts of kings in the form of sadir attam over the years. It is said that the name BharataNatyam was derived from the syllable's bhava, raga, and tala. This style includes both nritya (pure dance) and nrutya (abhinaya) (interpretative dance). In this article, the researcher only considers the Nrutya portion.

Nritya

nrityam talalayashrayam - movement of the body parts in accordance with *tala* and *laya*. Nritya in Sangitaratnakara is

*gatraviksepamatram tu sarvabhinayavarjitam.
angikoktaprakarena nrityam nrityavido viduhu.*

The ideal nritya is that which gives birth to beauty and joy at all levels of human comprehension, including physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. According to Bharata, nritya is the pleasant-sounding, physical movement of major and minor limbs displayed in a graceful manner, creating patterns in space while keeping rhythm with time. Thus, in nritya, the entire body is regarded as an instrument for producing action.

The solar plexus, located at the navel, serves as the **centre** from which all movements originate and are controlled by **breath**. Various bhargas are created by simply shifting the **centre**, i.e. the body's **balance** - sama, abhanga, tribhanga, and atibhanga. Along with earth-based movements (bhumi caris), aerial movements (akasiki caris) have been described, implying that the dancer has the ability to create a sense of **weightlessness** through her dance.

The half-seated or aramandi position of Bharatanatyam, with knees bent outwards, increases propinquity with the ground and thus connectivity with the earth. Because the individual's centre of gravity moves closer to the ground, this position improves balance, and the hands can be held in a curvilinear or chaturasra position. The overall effect is an increased sense of center, control, and balance, which keeps the senses alert and the mind relaxed.

Most Bharatanatyam dancers sustain serious injuries as a result of a lack of proper body strengthening training. Body movement training or understanding, muscle usage, and strengthening can save a dancer's body from long-term damage. It is critical for any dancer to strengthen the muscles that are used extensively in a specific form. The core muscles are used

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the most in Bharatnatyam; Pilates helps to strengthen the core, improve posture, alignment, and stamina.

Certain laws, such as alignment, warm-ups, strengthening, use of breath, flexibility, and injury prevention, apply to the body regardless of cultural or disciplinary differences.

Pilates:

Pilates is a method of exercise that focuses on flexibility, well-developed strength and stamina. Pilates focuses on appropriate postural alignment, core strength and muscle balance.

Pilates -pronounced: puh-lah-teez, Pilates exercises have its place in a group of Body-Mind Exercises, in which the focus is on controlled movement, breathing and mainly posture.

1. It improves mental and physical health,
2. works on flexibility,
3. and strengthens muscles through controlled movements
4. done as mat exercises or with equipment to tone and strengthen the body.

“This method syndicates principles of exercises from the Eastern cultures (control of motion by the mind, precision, body center as the main energy point, proper breathing and relaxation – Hatha-Yoga) and the Western cultures (endurance training, stabilization – classical ballet).” (3)

According to Crews, “the described training concept assumes reinforcing the muscles of the whole body; however, it is especially emphasizing conscious action exerted on deep muscular structures. Appropriate functioning of those structures is essential for normal stabilization during motion.” (4)

The research paper presents a theoretical part of physical exercises developed by Joseph Pilates named ‘Contrology’ and now known as Pilates, its importance and similarities with Indian classical dance form- Bharatanatyam.

The Pilates’ exercise, as a part of the Body Mind Exercises group, initially gained recognition among professional dancers, actors and choreographers and now has become more popular and is regularly applied in sport, fitness and physiotherapy. Pilates is a unique, precise and intelligent approach to exercise, body-conditioning. It gives you a slim, flexible, toned look, you feel more relaxed and mindful.

Key benefits:

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1. Your muscles are relaxed;
2. your movement is unrestricted; and
3. You achieve good flexibility.
4. Your posture improves as a result of being able to hold your muscles correctly.
5. Increased blood circulation as a result of improved flexibility, which allows the muscles to align more effectively
6. Improved circulation also gives you more energy.
7. Joints and muscles become and remain healthy. They do not tear easily if they are flexible and move freely.
8. Muscles quickly return to normal exercise, and after a few weeks of Pilates, you will notice visible muscle tone and see your body begin to evolve.
9. You don't have to make time for it every day; just 60 to 90 minutes twice a week is sufficient.

Pilates uses your body weight for shaping your muscles, and it trains each part of your body muscles evenly. For example, during an abdominal exercise, think about lengthening your limbs, lifting your buttocks, and connecting your shoulders as well as engaging your centre or belly.

“Pilates as supplementary training feels familiar to dancers because it embodies artistry quality of movement and an emphasis on breathing, alignment and adaptation, deep core support and mobility. Because of this, dancers may enjoy and commit to Pilates with confidence and ease. This can mean a higher rate of adherence to supplementary training.” (5)

“Since the 1920’s dancers have subjectively reported the benefits of engaging in the Pilates method alongside their dance training. In recent years scientific research has also started to evidence these benefits. Studies have shown that [Pilates](#)’ can help to improve alignment, flexibility and muscular strength in dancers, and due to its focus on fluid and controlled movements it is often a natural choice for dancers. More hypermobile or flexible dancers might wish to choose Pilates-based exercise in order to encourage greater strength and control.” (6)

Similarities in the Principles of Pilates’[1] and Bharatanatyam:

Principles	Pilates	Bharatanatyam
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<p>· Breathing:</p>	<p>Breathing is essential in the Pilates method. In Return to Life, Pilates allocates a section of his introduction explicitly to breathing. He saw significant value in increasing the intake of oxygen and the circulation of this oxygenated blood to every part of the body. This he saw as cleansing and invigorating. Proper full inhalation and complete exhalation were important to this. He recommended people to squeeze out the lungs as they would twist a wet towel dry. Pilates' energies to properly harmonize the breathing practice with movement.</p>	<p>You can help prevent muscle fatigue by providing your body with additional oxygen. Dancers with strong respiratory muscles can dance for longer periods of time while remaining alert and focused.</p>
<p>· Concentration</p>	<p>Pilates weights concentrated focus, the way that exercises are done is more important than the exercises themselves.</p>	<p>Bharatanatyam dancers must be aware of the importance of maintaining concentration. They will be able to remember what the next step is, what should be done next, and where to focus because they will be concentrating on dance movements and being fully aware of where they are.</p>

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<p>· Control</p>	<p>"Contrology" was Joseph Pilates' preferred name for his method, and it was based on the awareness of muscle control. All exercises are done with control. The muscles work to lift against gravity and the resistance of the springs and thereby control the movement of the body.</p>	<p>" In dancing, "control" means that your body is doing what your mind wants it to do.</p> <p>The movement in Bharatanatyam dance should be controlled; for example, while performing a basic Natta adavu, maintain Aramandi and place your leg in Anchita Pada-bheda by your side. The movement should be controlled.</p>
<p>· Centering</p>	<p>For students to control their bodies, they must have a starting place: the center. The "powerhouse" muscles are a group of muscles in the centre of the body that include the abdomen, lower and upper back, hips, buttocks, and inner thighs. In Pilates, all movement should start in the centre and work its way out to the limbs. All movement in Pilates should begin from the center and move outward to the limbs.</p>	<p>The Bharatanatyam dancer should focus on the centre of her body while maintaining Araimandi, then only one will be able to maintain the balance in the pose.</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Flow 	<p>Pilates aims for a sophisticated economy of movement, creating flow through the use of right transitions.</p>	<p>Only if the movements are executed in a fluid manner will the dance piece be considered graceful.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Postural alignment 	<p>Using correct posture while doing Pilates exercises progresses safety by correcting muscle imbalances and improving coordination.</p>	<p>Bharatanatyam dancers must maintain proper body alignment and posture in order to appear elegant and confident. It also helps with overall balance and control. Dancing with proper alignment is more comfortable and promotes longevity.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Precision 	<p>Precision is essential to do the Pilates correctly. The focus is on doing one precise and perfect movement, rather than many unenthusiastic ones. The aim is for this precision to ultimately become second nature and carry over into everyday life as grace and economy of movement.</p>	<p>It should be done precisely because it is our responsibility to take this ancient art form to the next level while maintaining its quality. The physical qualities and skills of the dancers determine the quality of this dance form. A dancer's body is more capable of a wide range of movement if it is stronger and more flexible.</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Relaxation 	<p>Correct muscle firing patterns and upgraded mental concentration are boosted with relaxation.</p>	<p>Relaxation allows for creativity. Relaxation makes room for creative thinking, which is often referred to as being in the flow or zone.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Stamina 	<p>With increased accuracy, motion becomes more effective so there is less stress to perform the exercises.</p>	<p>Stamina is defined as increased endurance. It is critical for professional dancers to maintain their energy level throughout a performance or class.</p>

The principles mentioned above are clearly related to the Bharatanatyam dance form, and if Bharatanatyam dancers begin practicing Pilates, it can help them improve their physical health and career span.

Similarities in Bharatanatyam Dance form and Pilates:

The researcher, who has been an active Bharatanatyam dancer for over 20 years and a Pilates instructor for over 7 years, can see the connection and similarity between Bharatanatyam dance movements and Pilates. And thought it was critical to introduce and incorporate into the Bharatanatyam dancer's routine.

Some of the similarities are,

1. Body alignment,
2. Core engagement,
3. Pelvic placement,
4. Full body engagement,
5. Concentration,
6. Spinal balance
7. Precision.

It's critical to understand the value of conditioning outside of dance class for both improved performance and injury prevention. Because of the repetition, Bharatanatyam dance movements stress the same body part over and over. Pilates can help Bharatanatyam dancers by strengthening their muscles and improving their balance.

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Pilates is a natural choice for most dancers when it comes to supplementary training. During World War I, founder Joseph Pilates began developing his concept for this exercise.

“As early as the 1920’s, when founder Joseph Pilates opened his inaugural studio in the United States, Pilates’ conditioning has been extremely popular among dancers (Gallagher, 1999, p.9). Leading dance figures such as George Balanchine and Martha Graham studied with Joseph Pilates and sent their students to train with him, causing Pilates to gain a significant following in the dance community (Gallagher, 1999, p.9). Continuing to grow in popularity among dancers, many dance companies, studios, and undergraduate and graduate programs now incorporate Pilates’ conditioning into their training (Ahearn, 2006, p.92). The anatomical and conceptual similarities between Pilates and dance, as well as many benefits of Pilates for dancers, explain the lasting and growing popularity of Pilates conditioning among dance communities throughout the world.” (7)

“The Pilates principles complement instructions and corrections given by all dance teachers within their classes, whatever genre is being taught. Every dancer should be determined to improve their technique and performance and studying the Pilates method can certainly help achieve the goal.” (8)

Over the course of 20 years of working with Bharatanatyam dancers, I've discovered that connecting mind and body produces meaningful results. It is critical to raise awareness about how movement works, where it comes from, and how to connect to it. Dancers can add a new level of grace, accuracy, muscle awareness, and sophistication to their dance practise and performances through kinesthetic input. They begin to understand their body's structure and become stronger and more flexible, as well as more mindful of how to move with full awareness of the body. Pilates is an important part of this process.

The Pilates principles are the same and cover all of the instructions and corrections that dance teachers give in their dance classes. Every Bharatanatyam dancer should be determined to improve their posture, physical health, dance technique, and performance; Pilates can help with this.

Breathing techniques may play an important role in improving breathing function in young Bharatanatyam dancers. Pilates breathing techniques can be incorporated into teachers' classes. Different breathing strategies used in Bharatanatyam classes, before or during performance, may highlight other practical aspects of the use of the breath in dance and assist young dancers in evolving in their art form.

Benefits of Pilates Exercise for Bharatanatyam Dancers:

1. Pilates allows you to move with or against resistance!

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2. Work on your balance
3. Increase your core strength.
4. Increases stability
5. Enhances Posture
6. Assists you in getting to know your body
7. Increases self-esteem and confidence
8. Its breathing technique helps to reduce stress.
9. Your movements become more fluid.

“Pilates has long been part of the professional dancers' supplementary training. In fact, Joseph Pilates Studio in NYC was in the same building as NYC Ballet.

We can say that Pilates has loads of benefits for dancers!

Whether it be in a rehabilitation capacity after injury, working towards your strength goals or for injury prevention, Pilates improves your stability, flexibility, strength, body awareness and coordination!” (9)

Conclusion:

The gist of the article is that Pilates training, which works on balance, breathing, flexibility, and postural alignment, can be a useful tool for Bharatanatyam dancers, professionals and dance teachers to improve muscular strength and flexibility of their students. Teachers should be aware of the importance of conditioning outside of dance classes, not only to improve performance but also to protect dancers from injuries, and Pilates is recommended because it develops capacities, which are critical for performance while not ignoring the artistic component. Pilates, in fact, has principles that are very similar to dance technique and employs movements that are analogous to certain dance technical skills. Pilates, by emphasizing breathing, alignment, position, and abdominal work, can help the dance class develop optimal dance technique, explore and expand one's physical capacity, and prevent and rehabilitate injuries.

So, based on the information provided above, we can conclude that Pilates principles are complementary to the Bharatanatyam dance form. Bharatanatyam dancers can use it for strength, posture, injury prevention, and rehabilitation, and regular Pilates practice (twice a week for 60 to 90 minutes) can help them advance in their careers. Pilates' workout addresses the needs of Bharatanatyam dance technique, allowing dancers' physical capacities to be developed in a specific way.

Other Indian Classical Dance styles have similar fundamental principles and could be interpreted similarly; however, the present study is restricted to Bharatanatyam dance form.

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