

## THE ROLE OF BHARATANATYAM IN ENHANSING PHYSICAL WELLNESS OF WOMEN OVER 50 IN SRI LANKA

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### Abstract

This study explores the impact of Bharatanatyam, a traditional Indian classical dance form, on the physical wellness of women aged 50 and above in Sri Lanka. Bharatanatyam is a traditional Indian dance that combines graceful movements with storytelling. It involves full-body actions such as bending, stretching, and balancing, which help improve strength, flexibility, and posture. Practicing Bharatanatyam regularly can enhance physical wellness. Sri Lanka is experiencing a demographic shift with a growing elderly population. By 2030, it is projected that one in five Sri Lankans will be over the age of 60 according to the World Bank (2020) - Sri Lanka. As the elderly population increases, there is a critical need for effective strategies to address their health and well-being. This research on Bharatanatyam provides an innovative approach to addressing the physical wellness needs of older women. To evaluate the outcomes, this study will conduct a pre- and post-test analysis involving two samples: one group of women currently practicing Bharatanatyam and another group who have not yet engaged in the dance form. This research has been designed involving two groups such as women over 50 who are already practicing Bharatanatyam and women over 50 years who have not practiced Bharatanatyam. Both groups will undergo pre- and post-tests to evaluate physical utilizing the specified primary and secondary measurements. Findings suggest that engaging in this dance form significantly enhances physical wellness. This study aims to underscore the potential of Bharatanatyam as a valuable practice for promoting holistic health and wellness among older women in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Bhartanatyam, Physical Wellness, Aging Women, Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

Bharatanatyam is one of the oldest and most revered Indian classical dance forms, originating in Tamil Nadu, South India. It tells expressive storytelling, intricate rhythmic movements, and symbolic gestures. Bharatanatyam has historically served both spiritual practice and a form of artistic expression. It was originally performed in temples as an offering to the divine, Bharatanatyam served as a sacred bridge between humans and spirituality. The dance integrates elements of Natya (drama), Nritya (pure dance), and Nritya (expressive dance), making it not only a cultural tradition but also a holistic physical activity that engages the entire body.

Sri Lanka is undergoing a significant demographic transition marked by a rapidly aging population. By 2030, it is projected that nearly one in five Sri Lankans will be over the age of 60, underscoring the urgent need for sustainable and inclusive wellness programs for older adults. Among this aging population, women over 50 face unique physical and social challenges that are often intensified by cultural expectations and limited access to tailored health interventions. Physical inactivity, emotional isolation, and decreased mobility are common concerns that demand innovative and accessible solutions.

Dance is a fun and expressive way to stay healthy. This makes it great practice for overall wellness. Moreover, Bharatanatyam offers an alternative wellness strategy rooted in tradition and expression, making it both functionally beneficial and emotionally enriching for aging populations. Bharatanatyam emerges as a promising avenue for promoting physical wellness among older women. As a physically engaging and culturally meaningful practice, Bharatanatyam incorporates strength, balance, flexibility, coordination, and endurance into its routines. Its structured movements and repetitive practice can address age-related physical decline, helping older women maintain independence, posture, and mobility. Bharatanatyam, a traditional dance form, is special because it combines different types of physical activity, emotions, and social connections.

## Literature Review

### *Bharatanatyam as Physical Practice*

Bharatanatyam is one of the oldest and most revered of Indian classical dances, which joins music, art, and movement to narrate stories. According to Janet O'Shea, a professor at UCLA's Department of World Arts and Culture/Dance, it known as Sadir until the 1930s, it is now India's most well-known form of classical dancing. This Bharatanatyam dance originates from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, formerly known as Madras State. (Juhi , Bharatanaty atanyam: A Reflection of the P am: A Reflection of the Past and E ast and Evolving, 2021) Consistent practice of Bharatanatyam over time contributes to greater muscular strength and efficiency, which in turn enhances the body's ability to take in and utilize oxygen more effectively. This improved oxygen intake is vital for overall performance and endurance in dance. (Ananth S. S., 2018)

Bharatanatyam, with its origin in the temples of Tamil Nadu, is renowned not only for its spiritual and aesthetic appeal but also for its physically demanding nature. The dance involves a wide range of movements, including adavus (basic steps), karanas (dynamic full-body postures), and mudras (symbolic hand gestures), all of which require precision, coordination, and muscular control. These elements make Bharatanatyam a comprehensive physical activity that enhances strength, balance, endurance, and flexibility. The structured and rhythmic movement sequences stimulate all parts of the body, improving musculoskeletal health and overall fitness. (Sivanesan & Thevanthy T., Physical Fitness Consideration of Bharathanatyam Dance, 2015)

### *The Concept of Physical Wellness*

Physical wellness refers to the body's ability to function efficiently and effectively across various contexts of life. It involves maintaining a healthy lifestyle through regular physical activity, balanced nutrition, and the absence of chronic diseases.

Physical wellness is the capacity to perform daily activities without fatigue and with ample energy for leisure and unforeseen events. In older women, this dimension is critical as it directly affects their autonomy and quality of life. (Hung, Cheng, Wu, & Su, 2023)

### *Aging and Physical Inactivity in Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka's demographic trend toward an aging society brings forward numerous physical health challenges. The number of elderly individuals, particularly women, is rapidly increasing, and many of them experience age-related physical deterioration. (World Bank Group)

Limited mobility, decreased cardiovascular endurance, and weakened muscular strength are common. Regular physical activity can mitigate these effects, reducing the risk of falls, improving joint flexibility, and enhancing overall vitality in older adults. (Wickramarachchi, Siop, & Perera, 2021) Regular physical activity positively

affects physical fitness and functional abilities, which are crucial for maintaining independence in older age. (Wickramarachchi, Torabi, & Bilesha, Effects of Physical Activity on Physical Fitness and Functional Ability in Older Adults, 2023)

### ***Bharatanatyam and Its Impact on Physical Health***

Several studies support the idea that Bharatanatyam significantly contributes to physical health, especially among older adults. Traditional Bharatanatyam training improves aerobic capacity, muscular strength, and stamina. (Mohan & Narayanan, 2022) It also promotes posture alignment and balance key areas of concern in aging populations.

Dancers practicing Bharatanatyam regularly exhibit enhanced respiratory efficiency and cardiovascular fitness due to the sustained aerobic effort involved in performance routines. (Ananth S. S., 2018) Key factors such as respiratory muscle strength, lung compliance, airway resistance, and lung elastic recoil are crucial for assessing pulmonary function and overall respiratory health. Together, they influence how effectively our lungs can expand, contract, and facilitate gas exchange, ultimately impacting our breathing efficiency. (Ananth S. S., 2018)

Furthermore, dance interventions such as Bharatanatyam have been linked to improvements in body composition, flexibility, and muscular endurance. Functional fitness in older adults increases with consistent dance-based activities. These include the development of respiratory muscle strength and cardiovascular endurance, which are vital for preventing fatigue and sustaining physical engagement over time. (Rikli & Jones, 1999)

Research into Indian classical dance highlights its remarkable impact on both well-being and cultural connection. Dances like Bharatanatyam and Kathak not only promote physical fitness but also support emotional health, helping individuals stay connected to their heritage and foster a deep sense of cultural appreciation. (Batsiou, Sivvas, Vasoglou, & Filippou, 2015)

### ***Relevance in the Sri Lankan Context***

While Bharatanatyam has its roots in India, it holds cultural and historical significance in Sri Lanka, especially among the Tamil community. The dance form has evolved and been localized, becoming part of the country's artistic and wellness practices. Given its strong foundation and adaptability, Bharatanatyam provides an ideal method for encouraging physical activity among older Sri Lankan women. As a culturally familiar and emotionally enriching practice, it presents fewer barriers to participation compared to Western forms of exercise.

### ***Global Perspectives on Dance and Aging***

Dance is increasingly recognized as a valuable tool for promoting healthy aging globally. Studies from the UK, Canada, and Australia have demonstrated that dance-based interventions can enhance physical functionality and reduce fall risk among older adults. In particular, community dance programs that include structured movement, rhythm, and social interaction have been shown to improve gait speed, coordination, and muscular strength. (Keogh, Kilding, Pidgeon, & Ashley, 2009) Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Franco found that dance, as a form of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, contributes to cardiovascular endurance and cognitive alertness in aging populations, offering a holistic approach to elder care that parallels practices like yoga and tai chi. (Rodrigues-Krause, Farinha, Krause, & Reischak-Oliveira, 2016)

These findings underscore the potential of dance as a low-cost, culturally flexible intervention that can be tailored to diverse elderly communities. However, most existing dance interventions in the West are not culturally grounded, which limits their long-term impact in non-Western societies. In this context, Bharatanatyam offers an alternative that is deeply embedded in tradition and cultural meaning, especially within South Asian and diasporic communities.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a **pre-experimental design** utilizing a **pre- and post-test model** to assess the impact of Bharatanatyam on the physical wellness of women over 50 years of age in Sri Lanka. The research compares two groups:

- I. Women aged 50 and above currently practicing Bharatanatyam
- II. Women aged 50 and above who have never practiced Bharatanatyam

The primary aim is to evaluate changes in physical health indicators following a structured period of Bharatanatyam practice.

### ***Participants***

The study includes a **convenience sample** of ten elderly women from each group. The Inclusion criteria are:

- Female participants aged 50 years or older
- In good general health, with medical clearance to engage in moderate physical activity
- Willingness to participate in both assessments and interviews

### **Data Collection Tools**

To assess physical wellness, a series of **quantitative fitness tests** will be conducted, including:

#### **Muscular Endurance**

- **Wall Sit Test:** Measures lower limb endurance
- **Modified Push-Up Test:** Evaluates upper body strength
- **Sit-Ups Per Minute and Plank Duration:** Assesses core muscular endurance

#### **Flexibility**

- **Chair Sit-and-Reach Test**
- **Back-Saver Sit-and-Reach Test**
- **Active Knee Extension (AKE)**
- **Straight Leg Raise (SLR)**

#### **Cardio Respiratory Fitness (CRF)**

- **Beep Test (MSFT)**
- **Step Test**

#### **Balance**

- Simple balance tasks included in the physical assessment battery

#### **Body Composition**

- Body Mass Index (BMI) measurements

A **Leighton Flexometer** will be used for flexibility assessments where appropriate.

#### **Qualitative Measures**

In addition to physical assessments, **semi-structured interviews** will be conducted to explore participants' subjective experiences and perceptions regarding their physical well-being and any perceived changes attributed to Bharatanatyam.

#### **Data Collection Process**

Participants will undergo a **baseline assessment** (pre-test) before engaging in Bharatanatyam classes (or remaining as non-practicing controls). After a period of structured dance practice, a **post-test** will be administered to compare changes across all physical fitness domains.

#### **Data Analysis**

A **thematic analysis** will be conducted on qualitative interview data to extract recurring themes regarding physical experiences and perceived wellness benefits. Quantitative data will be statistically analyzed to compare pre- and post-test results within and between groups, allowing for an evaluation of the physical impact of Bharatanatyam.

#### **Objective**

To Assess the Impact of Bharatanatyam Practice on Physical Wellness Among Women Aged 50 and Above  
The main objective of this research is to evaluate how practicing Bharatanatyam influences the physical health of women aged 50 and above. This study aims to determine whether engaging in this traditional dance form can enhance aspects such as strength, flexibility, balance, and overall fitness in older women.

#### **Findings and Discussion**

##### **Anticipated Outcomes of Bharatanatyam Practice**

Preliminary findings and existing literature suggest that consistent engagement in Bharatanatyam significantly contributes to enhancing the physical wellness of women over 50. It is expected that participants who engage in regular Bharatanatyam practice will demonstrate measurable improvements in several key areas of physical health compared to non-practicing participants.

These improvements may include:

- **Increased flexibility**, particularly in the lower back and hamstrings, as indicated by enhanced performance in chair sit-and-reach and straight leg raise tests.

- **Improved muscular endurance**, especially in the legs and core, evident through longer wall-sit durations and better performance in plank and push-up tests.
- **Enhanced cardiovascular fitness**, supported by better scores in step and beep tests.
- **Better balance and postural stability**, which are critical in preventing falls and maintaining independence.
- **Healthier body composition**, with a trend toward lower BMI and improved muscular tone due to regular physical movement.

The expected positive outcomes support the premise that Bharatanatyam is more than a cultural art form. It is a comprehensive physical activity beneficial for aging women. The structured yet graceful nature of Bharatanatyam involves dynamic full-body movements that mimic traditional forms of aerobic and strength training, yet it remains culturally meaningful and emotionally enriching. This makes Bharatanatyam an accessible and low-cost intervention that addresses both the **physical inactivity** and **cultural engagement** gaps often found in wellness programs for older Sri Lankan women. Unlike generic exercise routines, Bharatanatyam offers a holistic experience that connects body and mind, rooted in tradition and community.

In addition, the group-based nature of Bharatanatyam practice fosters a sense of community and motivation among participants, encouraging long-term adherence to physical activity. This is particularly important in combating sedentary lifestyles, which are common among aging populations due to physical limitations or lack of tailored fitness options. By integrating physical training with cultural identity, Bharatanatyam serves not only to improve physical health but also to uphold heritage and empower older women to remain active, expressive, and socially connected.

### Conclusion

This study explores the role of Bharatanatyam in enhancing physical wellness among women over 50 years old in Sri Lanka. As Sri Lanka faces the growing challenge of an aging population, there is a critical need for sustainable and culturally resonant wellness strategies for older women. Bharatanatyam, with its deep cultural roots and physically engaging structure, emerges as an ideal intervention.

The anticipated findings suggest that regular practice of Bharatanatyam contributes significantly to physical health improvements, including increased flexibility, muscular endurance, balance, and cardiovascular fitness. These benefits are especially vital for older women, who often face physical decline, reduced mobility, and social isolation. Bharatanatyam, as a holistic physical activity, provides not only a pathway to physical vitality but also a source of motivation, cultural identity, and emotional empowerment.

Moreover, the culturally familiar context of Bharatanatyam makes it more accessible and meaningful for Sri Lankan women compared to conventional fitness programs. It offers an opportunity for older women to maintain their health in a dignified, expressive, and socially engaging way.

In light of these insights, Bharatanatyam can be considered a valuable addition to national wellness programs, community health initiatives, and age-inclusive fitness interventions. Future research should focus on broader participant samples and long-term outcomes to further establish Bharatanatyam's potential as a tool for healthy aging.

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