

culture

dance

rooted

BETWEEN TEXT AND TEMPLE

Dancer Bala Devi Chandrashekar talks about her latest production, *Mauli - A Timeless Tradition*, her dancing journey, and more

BALA DEVI CHANDRASHEKAR comes from a family steeped in scholarship and storytelling, and that lineage shows in the ways she approaches *Bharatanatyam*. A dancer and researcher at heart, she is known for grounding her work in deep study of ancient texts, architecture, and philosophy, shaping productions that speak as much to the present as they do to the past.

Her latest work, *Mauli - A Timeless Tradition*, arrives in Chennai as part of this ongoing exploration. Centered on the *Pandharupur* tradition and the *Varkari* movement, the production reflects devotion as something collective, lived, and deep-

ly human. A recent recipient of the *Natya Kala Visharad* Award, Bala Devi speaks to us ahead of her performance in the city. Excerpts:

Can you tell us what *Mauli - A Timeless Tradition* is about?

Mauli - A Timeless Tradition is a *Bharatanatyam* exploration of the *Pandharupur wari*—the living, walking pilgrimage of the *Varkari* saints and devotees to Lord Panduranga Vittala. The work traces not just a destination but a way of life: humility, surrender, equality, and unwavering devotion expressed through song, poetry, and collective movement over centuries.

You are known for doing a lot of research before a show. How did you go about bringing the history and philosophy of this tradition to the stage?

My approach begins with treating the subject as lived philosophy rather than material to be illustrated. For *Mauli - A Timeless Tradition*, the research was layered and rigorous—textual, historical, musical, and experiential.

I immersed myself in the writings and *abhangs* of the *Varkari* saints—Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, and Tukaram—to understand not just their poetry but their worldview: devotion grounded in humility, social equality, and direct personal relationship with the Divine. This was complemented by studying the historical evolution of the *wari*, its routes, rituals, and the way it functions as a moving spiritual community rather than a static institution.

Equally important was translating philosophy into the grammar of *Bharatanatyam*. I examined how ideas like surrender, *nama sankeertanam*, and collective devotion could be embodied through rhythm, repetition, spatial design, and restraint—often choosing simplicity over ornamentation. Every choreographic choice was tested against a single question: does this serve the spirit of the tradition, or merely decorate it?

Over the years, you have performed in over 35 countries. How do you think people from different cultures connect with *Bharatanatyam*?

Across cultures, people connect to *Bharatanatyam* not through familiarity with its vocabulary, but through its intent. Even when audiences do not understand the language, mythology, or musical structure, they recognise sincerity, discipline, and emotional truth.

Bharatanatyam communi-

cates through rhythm, geometry, stillness, and controlled energy—elements that transcend culture. Audiences may not decode every gesture, but they intuitively sense devotion, conflict, surrender, joy, or contemplation. The form's precision builds trust; once that trust is established, viewers are willing to travel inward with the performer.

I have also observed that different cultures connect through different entry points. Some are drawn to the meditative stillness and sculptural quality of the form, others to its rhythmic vitality and relationship to music, still others to the philosophical depth and ethical questions embedded in the narratives. *Bharatanatyam* is robust enough to accommodate all these readings without losing its integrity.

When the dance is rooted in rigorous training, lived philosophy, and honest inquiry—rather than explanation or spectacle—it meets audiences where they are. In that moment, *Bharatanatyam* ceases to be seen as “Indian classical dance” alone and is experienced instead as a refined human language, capable of dialogue across cultures.

Open to all. December 27, 5.30 pm at Kartik Fine Arts, Bhavan Auditorium, Mylapore; January 4, 5.30 pm at Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, R K Swamy Auditorium, Mylapore; and January 9, 5.30 pm at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore.

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Bala Devi Chandrashekar

INDULGE
THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2025 | CHENNAI

traditional

Creative confluence

The *Sangam* Festival brings together distinct choreographic voices to reflect on dancing tradition



Ananta Nartana

THE SANGAM FESTIVAL returns to Chennai as a meeting point for ideas, styles, and artistic practices within Indian classical dance. The festival takes its cue from the idea of *sangam*—a coming together, bringing multiple voices and approaches into conversation rather than presenting a single aesthetic or narrative.

Conceived by *Bharatanatyam* exponent Bala Devi Chandrashekar, the festival has, over the years, positioned itself as a space that values context as much as performance. Alongside stage presentations, it has also foregrounded learning, discussion, and exchange.

This year's edition features three productions that highlight different directions within the classical dance landscape. *Ananta Nartana* by Aayam Institute of Performing Arts, New Delhi, focuses on ensemble choreography, using collective movement to explore rhythm, form, and spatial design. The work places emphasis on group dynamics, offering a perspective that moves beyond the solo-centric traditions often associated with classical dance.

Wichitra Pradarshini, presented by Padma Shri Chitra Visweswaran and Sukanya Ravindhar, brings together distinct creative sensibilities rooted in classical vocabulary. The production reflects how individual interpretation and long-standing tradition can coexist, revealing the elasticity of form within established frameworks.

Completing the programme is *Meenakshi* by Tejas Nrithyanjali, Arkonam, which draws from mythological and devotional themes. Grounded in narrative and spiritual inquiry, the work engages with the philosophical underpinnings that continue to inform classical dance practices across regions.

Reflecting on the festival's intent, Bala Devi says, “The core mission of *Sangam* Festival was to establish a convergence of Indian classical music and dance from diverse regions of India and South Asia, fostering collaboration with artists from global traditions.” The emphasis, she suggests, is as much on sharing knowledge as it is on performance.

Open to all. December 30, 10 am.
At Kartik Fine Arts.
Mylapore.
—AP

