

Mauli – A Timeless Tradition: Bala Devi Chandrashekar on Bhakti, Bharatanatyam and the Power of Collective Devotion



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Bharatanatyam exponent **Bala Devi Chandrashekar** has long been known for her deeply researched, philosophically rooted productions that seamlessly weave together shastra, sculpture, music and literature. Her latest work, *Mauli – A Timeless Tradition*, draws from the centuries-old Pandharpur wari and the Varkari movement, presenting devotion not as spectacle, but as lived, collective experience.

In conversation with *Hospitality News Magazine*, Bala Devi Chandrashekar speaks about the inspiration behind *Mauli*, her multidisciplinary approach, artistic evolution, and how platforms like the Sangam Festival continue to showcase the enduring relevance of India's classical dance traditions.

What inspired you to choose the Pandharpur wari and the Varkari tradition as the central theme for *Mauli – A Timeless Tradition*?

The Pandharpur wari and the Varkari tradition inspired *Mauli – A Timeless Tradition* because they embody an unbroken, living continuum of bhakti that has flowed across centuries without reliance on spectacle or patronage.

At its core lies a radical spiritual democracy, where devotion dissolves distinctions of caste, class and scholarship. The poetry of the Varkari saints offers profound philosophical depth rooted in lived experience rather than abstraction.

The physical act of pilgrimage, walking, singing and surrendering resonated deeply with me as embodied spirituality, aligning naturally with Bharatanatyam's kinetic language. *Mauli* emerged as an artistic response to this collective, timeless surrender to Panduranga Vittala.

Your works are known for blending shastra, sculpture, music and literature. How did this multidisciplinary approach shape the narrative and choreography for *Mauli*?

For *Mauli*, the multidisciplinary approach allowed the Varkari tradition to be experienced not merely as history, but as a living philosophy embodied in form.

Shastra provided the philosophical framework, while temple sculpture and iconography shaped spatial design, stance and kinetic geometry. Abhanga poetry and kirtan traditions informed the musical and rhythmic architecture, guiding both narrative pacing and emotional contour.

Literature anchored the choreography in lived devotion, translating metaphysical ideas into accessible human experience. Together, these disciplines converged to create a cohesive narrative where movement becomes an act of collective remembrance and surrender.

The wari embodies values like equality, devotion and collective humanity. How did you translate these spiritual and emotional dimensions into movement vocabulary and stage design?

The values of equality and collective humanity were translated primarily through movement and musical architecture rather than visual spectacle. I consciously employed minimal stage props, allowing the body, rhythm and shared spatial pathways to carry the emotional and spiritual weight of the wari.

Elaborate musical structures rooted in abhanga, kirtan and cyclical laya shaped the collective pulse and guided the choreography. The movement vocabulary emphasised walking patterns, unison phrases and grounded repetition, reflecting devotion as a shared, lived experience. This restraint in design ensured that the focus remained on collective surrender and the inner journey central to the Varkari ethos.

With your global experiences and recognition as 'Natya Kala Visharadha Ha', how does this production reflect your artistic evolution, and what message do you hope audiences take away from *Mauli*?

Mauli reflects my artistic evolution towards greater restraint, depth and inner clarity, shaped by decades of performing across diverse global contexts.

The recognition as *Natya Kala Visharadha Ha* reaffirmed my commitment to scholarship-driven work where tradition is not presented as nostalgia, but as a living ethical force. This production distils movement, music and philosophy into an offering rather than a display, privileging collective emotion over individual virtuosity.

Through *Mauli*, I hope audiences are reminded that devotion can be egalitarian, participatory and profoundly humane. The enduring message is that spiritual continuity is sustained not by grandeur, but by humility, shared faith and walking together.

How do the featured productions at this year's Sangam Festival showcase the richness and appeal of India's classical dance tradition to a wider audience?

This year's Sangam Festival brings together a thoughtfully curated set of productions that reflect the breadth and vitality of India's classical dance traditions. From *Ananta Nartana*, which celebrates expansive ensemble movement, to *Vichitra Pradarshini*, showcasing distinctive creative voices within a classical framework, the festival foregrounds both continuity and innovation.

Together with *Meenakshi*, which draws from mythological and devotional narratives, the festival demonstrates how classical dance continues to evolve while remaining deeply anchored in tradition. The diversity of themes, choreographic approaches and ensemble work makes the performances accessible and engaging for a wide audience. Collectively, the productions affirm classical dance as a living art form rich in heritage, expressive in content and relevant to contemporary audiences.

Event Schedule: *Mauli – A Timeless Tradition* (All are welcome)

- **25th December 2025 | 7:30 PM**
Brahma Gana Sabha, TAG Dakshinamurthy Auditorium, PS High School, Mylapore, Chennai
- **27th December 2025 | 5:30 PM**
Kartik Fine Arts, Bhavan Auditorium, Mylapore, Chennai
- **4th January 2026 | 5:30 PM**
Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, R K Swamy Auditorium, Mylapore, Chennai
- **9th January 2026 | 5:30 PM**
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore, Chennai

Event Schedule: Sangam Festival 2025

- **30th December 2025 | 10:00 AM**
Kartik Fine Arts, Bhavan Auditorium, Mylapore, Chennai