

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

CHENNAI is home to countless *sabhas*, each brimming with talent and events every Margazhi season. At its core, these *sabhas* provide a wider platform for diverse art forms to thrive and celebrate them.

On different days, till January 9, 2026, these spaces will reverberate with the latest operatic dance-theatre, *Mauli*—A Timeless Tradition. An 80-minute-long production by Bharatanatyam exponent Bala Devi Chandrashekhar is rooted in research and engages deeply with philosophy, temple architecture, classical literature, and sacred artistic traditions. This choreography is anchored in the present, drawing relevance from contemporary social contexts. She says, "Remaining relevant to contemporary society is essential to me. As an artiste, I believe I have a responsibility to give back meaningfully to the community."

This philosophy extends beyond the stage into her curatorial vision for the Sangam Festival, an organisation committed to the preservation, promotion, and showcasing of exceptional Indian classical artists and South Asian arts. "Preservation, for me, means creating work that can withstand the test of time. Audiences should leave Sangam Festival 2025 feeling they experienced something truly special," she says.

The festival transcends artistic pursuits and serves as an extensive resource centre, offering knowledge, promotion, references, and unwavering support to the arts community in both

Of dance, dialogue, and devotion

A human-centric approach

Beyond choreography and curation, Bala Devi is also shaping a larger framework she calls Artistic Intelligence, a concept that emerged from her academic engagement. In an era dominated by Artificial Intelligence, her intervention is human-centric. "At a time when the world is still grappling with the true meaning of artificial intelligence, I propose the idea of artistic intelligence – a deeply human-centred form of intelligence. Rooted in rigorous classical arts training, particularly Bharatanatyam, artistic intelligence cultivates creativity, discernment, leadership, and ethical judgement. In an age increasingly shaped by technology, I believe it is essential to consciously reframe AI not merely as artificial intelligence, but as artistic intelligence – one that places human sensitivity, imagination, and responsibility at its core," she says.



the USA and India. Its activities encompass performances, lectures, workshops, digital resources, mentoring, and financial support for artistes.

Designed as a performance-seminar, the festival challenges artistes to arrive with intent. "Every presenter understands that they are contributing to the larger vision of the Sangam Festival. That shared commitment has made the festival consistently informative and successful over the past three years," she notes. The format is intentionally compact. Within half-a-day, the audience encounters a wide spectrum of ideas and practices. Bala notes, "Through performances and lecture-demonstrations, presenters arrive deeply prepared and eager to engage diverse audiences

— scholars, dancers, students, and culturally curious minds alike." Stating that there are three programmes in the event list, she points out, "The festival is intentionally crisp in format, yet extremely effective in impact."

The latest edition brings together a curated set of productions that reflect the scope and vigour of the country's classical dance traditions. 'Ananta Nartana', presented by Aayam Institute of Performing Arts, New Delhi, celebrates expansive ensemble movement and the dynamic possibilities of group choreography. Showcasing distinctive creative voices within a classical framework, highlighting the diversity of contemporary approaches rooted in tradition, is 'Vichitra Pradarshini', presented by Padma Shri recipient Chitra Visweswaran, and Sukanya Ravindhar.

Concluding the programme is Tejas Nrithyanjali's 'Meenakshi', which draws from mythological and devotional narratives to reflect the enduring spiritual core of classical dance. These productions demonstrate how classical dance continues to evolve while remaining deeply anchored in tradition.

The festival is a stage, which is shared equally by the up-and-coming artistes and the ones who have already left a mark. "We are excited to provide artists a platform to share their knowledge. Each one brings an expansive creative canvas to the festival," she concludes.

Sangam Festival will be held on December 30, 2025, at Kartik Fine Arts at 10 am. All are welcome.