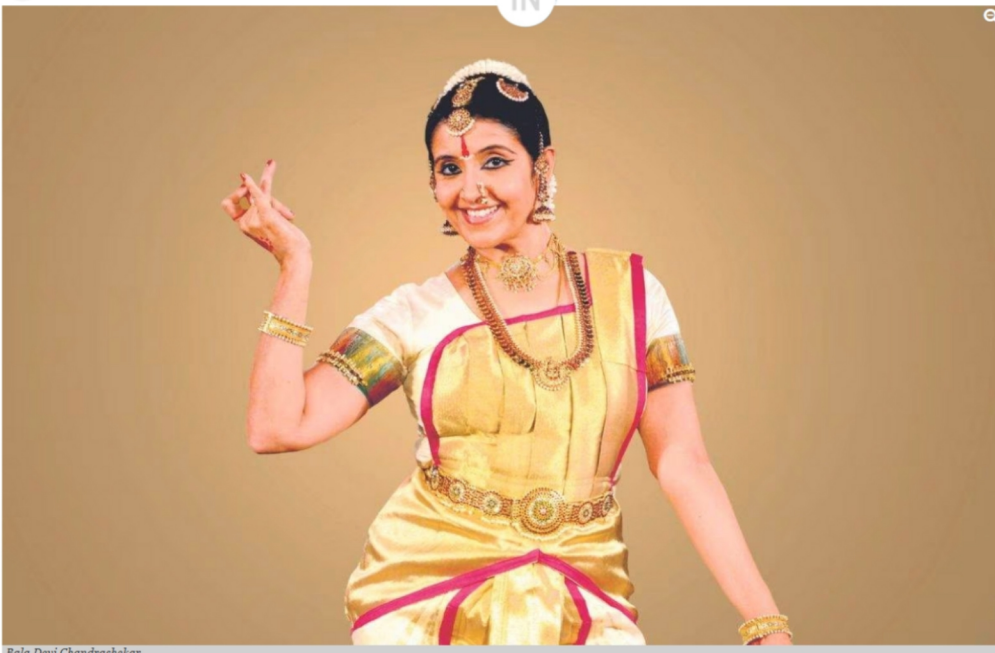


# Bala Devi Chandrashekar's Maa — the Eternal Truth pays homage to mother nature

*This Bharatanatyam performance emphasises the protection and nurturing role nature plays in sustaining life*



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Bala Devi Chandrashekar

Acclaimed Bharatanatyam dancer, Bala Devi Chandrashekar, is widely recognised for her distinctive scholarly approach, delving into ancient texts and conducting extensive research to craft captivating performances. Her artistic pursuits have taken her to over 35 countries, where she has enthralled audiences with over 300 mesmerising performances! Based in Princeton, New Jersey, she is the artistic director of the Shree Padma Nrityam Academy of Performing Arts. She has received numerous accolades including the Kalaimamani Award, Bharata Nritya Seva Mani, and the Nitya Kala Bharathi.

Bala will be in Chennai to perform her latest production Maa — the Eternal Truth, and we got a chance to catch up with the artiste.

**MAA — the Eternal Truth pays homage to Mother Nature. As the world grapples with the climate crisis, your piece comes right in time. But what in particular made you choose this theme?**

As a child, I grew up in the midst of nature in my ancestral village in Kodavasal. Years later, when the world was hit by Covid-19, I realised that the 'old normal' is never going to be 'the normal' again. I had personally witnessed the horrible outcomes of the tsunami and the regular floods in Chennai, having raised and contributed money for these causes. I have always felt the need to leverage Bharatanatyam to raise funds and to date, I have raised over \$500,000 for charity. I could hear Mother Nature crying out but we have no time or patience to pay heed. With my production, Maa, I was determined to showcase her (nature's) plight. About 15 years back, I was the first dancer to have taken on the challenge of reading up on esoteric ancient scriptures and then carving out relevant messages for the diverse and contemporary world we live in, while presenting in a strictly classical Bharatanatyam format in a solo, operatic and thematic style to world-class recorded music

**Please give us details about the production.**

Maa — the Eternal Truth is my 10th solo thematic operatic Bharatanatyam production. It explores and celebrates the loving nature of mother and mother earth. Drawing inspiration from ancient texts and philosophical contexts, it highlights the profound connection between a mother and mother earth. It delves into the significance of karma bhoomi and emphasises the protection and nurturing role she plays in sustaining life. The interconnectedness of all existence is explored through the symbolism of the 18-faced rudraksha and the intricate web of a mother's love. It also emphasises our responsibility to protect and preserve the planet.

**You are based in New Jersey. Please tell us about the reception for Bharatanatyam there.**

I consider myself a global ambassador of Bharatanatyam. Having lectured, performed, and taught over 3,000 students, I still remain a student. I do not dilute to make it easy to teach. I have a reputation in New Jersey as a guru who holds on to the purity of Bharatanatyam. I teach children the need to help the community leverage Bharatanatyam. Every year in November/December, we have over 15 fundraisers (through performances). I have students who are nurses working in stressful environment, CEOs of companies, doctors, and of course, school and college goers.

**Do you think Bharatanatyam has changed?**

Over the last 15 years, from my first production Nanadanar Charithram — the story of devotee of Shiva, who was from the oppressed caste, Uddhava Gita: Lord Krishna's last message, Vishwam — The Omnipresent, Tripura — Divine Feminine (based on women power), Karna — Destiny's Child (story of a warrior on the wrong side, Brihadeeswara: Form to Formless (through the eyes of a devanadiyal, based on the life of high priestess of the Thanjavur Periya Kovil, reviving the importance of devanadiyal; Padmavati — an Avatar — all my subjects are focused on educating the audience on various dimensions of a subject they have never contemplated on before. I have been pining to elevate the conversation with audience from across countries and beliefs.

**Please tell us how your dance journey began, why and when did you move to New Jersey and how do you want to continue to contribute towards Bharatanatyam.**

I started my dance journey in Hyderabad when I was seven years old. My first guru was Jayalakshmi Narayanan. Later in Chennai, I learnt from Dr Padma Subrahmanyam. Initially, I lived in the Middle East where I was actively performing and teaching, before moving to Princeton, New Jersey. It was my husband's career that took me to the USA. I continue on my journey of studying the scriptures with guidance from very selective erudite scholars and collaborate with experts in the field of literature, music and arts, and present my work worldwide. My work translates as lectures, demonstrations, workshops, and performances for universities, corporate entities, private organisations and research wings.

**How does it feel to come back to perform here?**

I visit my home town Thanjavur quite often. I come to Chennai almost every four months. This is my home and it feels great to be here performing for an appreciative audience.

*Tickets at INR 100 to `2,000. December 25, 6.15 pm. At RK Swamy Hall, Mylapore. December 30, 5.30 pm. At Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore. January 3, 7.30 pm. At Krishna Gana Sabha, T Nagar. January 5, 6 pm. At Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore.*

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