



Bala Devi Chandrashekar

| Dance

## Bharatanatyam exponent Bala Devi Chandrashekar on merging history with dance

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

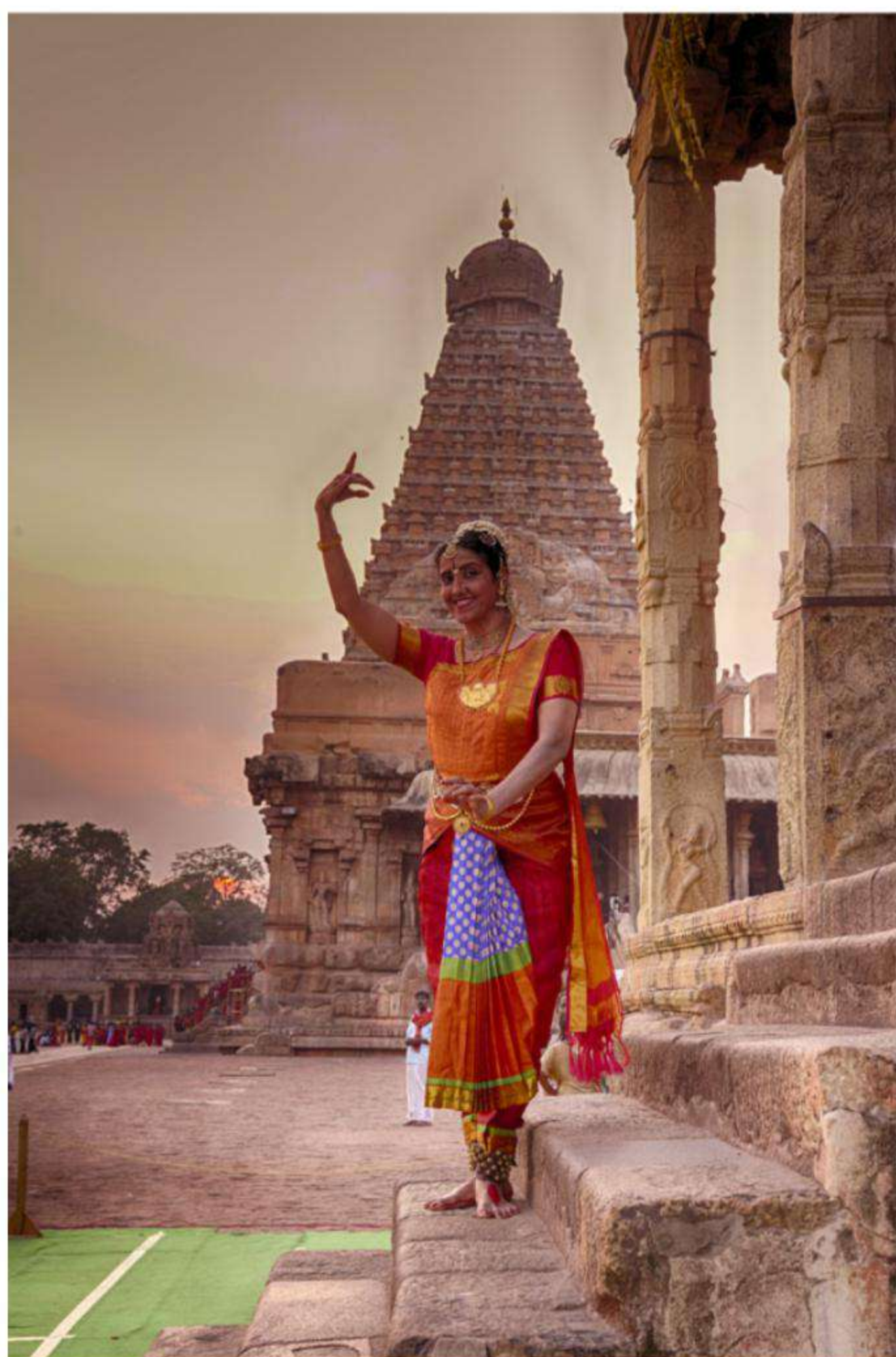
Bala Devi Chandrashekar comes from a family steeped in scholarship and storytelling, and that lineage shows in the way she approaches *Bharatanatyam*. A dancer and researcher at heart, she is known for grounding her work in deep study of ancient texts, architecture, and philosophy, shaping productions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

### How Bala Devi Chandrashekar is turning the Pandharpur wari into a Bharatanatyam masterpiece

Her latest work, *Mauli-A Timeless Tradition*, arrives in Chennai as part of this ongoing exploration. Centered on the *Pandharpur* tradition and the *Varkari* movement, the production reflects devotion as something collective, lived, and deeply human. A recent recipient of the *Natya Kala Visharadhaha* Award, Bala Devi speaks to us ahead of her performance in the city. Excerpts:

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

**A** *Mauli-A Timeless Tradition* is a *Bharatanatyam* exploration of the *Pandharpur 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.



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**Q** 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?

**A** 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?

**Q** With 12 major productions now in your repertoire, how do you feel your style or your choice of themes has changed over the years?

**A** With each production, my relationship to both form and content has become more distilled and intentional. In the early years, my focus was on demonstrating the breadth of *Bharatanatyam*—its narrative richness, technical complexity, and visual grandeur. Over time, the emphasis has shifted from display to distillation.

The most significant change has been in my choice of themes. I am increasingly drawn to ideas rather than episodes—to philosophy over plot, to inner journeys over external spectacle. While my earlier works often relied on strong narrative anchors, the later productions engage with abstractions such as surrender, impermanence, collective faith, feminine principle, and ethical choice. This has required greater restraint, allowing silence, repetition, and minimalism to carry meaning.

Stylistically, my movement vocabulary has become more economical and deliberate. I am less interested in virtuosity for its own sake and more invested in precision, clarity of intent, and spatial intelligence. The body now functions as a thinking instrument—capable of inquiry, hesitation, and stillness—rather than as a vehicle for continuous embellishment.

What has remained constant is the commitment to rigorous research and textual grounding. What has evolved is the confidence to trust simplicity, to let philosophy lead choreography, and to allow the audience space to reflect rather than be instructed. In that sense, the journey across these productions mirrors the themes themselves—moving steadily from form toward essence.

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

**A** 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* communicates 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.

**Q** You are a recent recipient of *Natya Kala Visharadhaha* Award. What does awards like these mean to you?

**A** Awards such as the *Natya Kala Visharadhaha* are meaningful to me not as personal milestones alone, but as moments of affirmation for the path one has chosen. They acknowledge years of quiet, often unseen work—research, discipline, doubt, refinement—and the decision to remain anchored in depth rather than immediacy.

I see such recognition as a responsibility rather than a culmination. It reaffirms that scholarship-driven, philosophy-centered work still has relevance in a fast-moving cultural landscape, and that there is space for rigor, restraint, and integrity in classical performance today. Importantly, it also reflects the collective ecosystem that sustains an artist—teachers, musicians, scholars, institutions, students, and audiences who engage seriously with the work.

At this stage of my journey, awards encourage reflection rather than celebration. They prompt me to ask whether my work continues to question, evolve, and remain truthful to the traditions I represent. If they serve as a reminder to deepen that commitment and to contribute meaningfully to the future of *Bharatanatyam*, then they have fulfilled their true purpose.



**Q** What can we expect from you next?

**A** What lies ahead is a continuation of the same inquiry, but with greater focus and responsibility. My upcoming work will deepen the exploration of philosophy-led *Bharatanatyam*—where movement functions as reflection rather than narration, and where form serves thought.

Equally important to me is mentorship and institutional work. Building thoughtful dancers, nurturing critical engagement with classical forms, and creating space for scholarship within performance practice are priorities going forward.

Rather than offering something “new” in the sense of novelty, what I aim to offer next is greater clarity—work that is quieter, more precise, and more uncompromising in its commitment to depth, integrity, and timeless relevance.

*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.*