

## 40 countries... 300 dance performances!

"Art is the point where all education converges at the peak. They are interconnected," says Bharatanatyam artist Baladevi Chandrasekhar.



"Understanding people is also an aspect of art. I have been successful in that task. I have worked in seven universities. I have never left my involvement in dance anywhere, anytime. Art is the point where all education comes together at the peak. They are interconnected," says Bharatanatyam artist Baladevi Chandrasekhar.

The only classical dancer to participate in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, he is the director of the Snapa Performing Arts Academy, an arts institution located in Bristol, New Jersey, USA.

A multi-faceted figure, including a Bharatanatyam artist, researcher, and Indian cultural ambassador, he has conducted 300 Bharatanatyam performances in 40 countries.

When talking to him:

"My hometown is Umayyarpuram, near Thanjavur. My great-grandfather Neelakanda Sastri was a playwright. He is buried near the samadhi of Thyagaramma. He was the guru of the great sage Pujyashri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swami."

My uncle, Shanthanandapuri, wrote the screenplay for my three dance projects, 'Uddhav Geetha', 'Vishvam' and 'Tripura'. He attained enlightenment in Tiruvannamalai. My husband's relatives, Sundara Bhagavathar, Krishna Bhagavathar and Swami Bhagavathar, are students of Thyagaramma.





Every year, we go with our families to the Umayyarpuram Ram Math, which has a century-old tradition, and perform Sita's wedding. I have danced many times during that time.

My parents have artistic talents in dance and music. It was my father-in-law, who was the dean of IIT, who first made me a veena and mridangam out of fiberglass. It was against this background that I learned dance.

I did my Bachelor of Science and M.Phil. in General Management from the University of Chennai. I did research on oil companies. I studied for a diploma in labor. I became an RSA accredited assessor from a UK university. I was an excellent student in both studies and arts. In this way, I developed a dual interest in both education and arts.

**11 Dance Works:** My first guru for Bharatanatyam was Hyderabad's Jayalakshmi Narayan. I learned from Dr. Padma Subramaniam to look at the arts as research and with an investigative perspective. That is why I am doing my 11 dance works in a research-based manner.

I started 'Nandanar Charithram' from the story of Nandanar. 'MLV Favorites' is based on the songs of MLV.

'Krishnaarpanam' and 'Uddhav Geeta' are about the last message of Lord Krishna. 'Vishvam' refers to the divine energy, 'Tripura' refers to Ambal, and 'Karna' refers to Karna, the child of fate.

The fact that 'Brahadeeswarar' refers to the formlessness of the form, is a testament to the greatness of the Thanjavur temple in the eyes of the Devaradiyyas.

The incarnation 'Padmavati' was written by Jayadevar in the twelfth century and is associated with Puri Jagannath.

'Tanjai Naalvar' is a dance work in the style of four students of Muthusamy Dikshitar: Ponnaiya, Chinnaiya, Sivanandham, and Vadivelu.

For the past two years, 'Ma' has been a work about Mother Earth, talking about climate change and deforestation. Each concept speaks to each other.



'Mavuli' is a timeless tradition. It is a tradition of Pandharpur. It is based on a 250 km long walk among pilgrims. I have created this as a world-class work and made it into an hour or an hour and a half program through Bharat.

Not only in Tamil. I have done it in various languages including Telugu, Kannada, Hindi, Bengali, Oriya. Language is not a barrier to Indian art. I am doing this by crossing language boundaries. This dance initiative has been held in various countries of the world.

**Studies:** Many studies do not have prototypes. Even if there are no formal direct sources, they will examine Puranas, epics, literature, inscriptions, non-written news, musical notes, Upanyas, Agamas, Silpas, dance scriptures, etc. and form an idea from them. I approach many of these things for my dance production and create that work.

**Teaching Bharatanatyam:** I have been teaching Bharatanatyam since 1992. Dancing is one experience. Teaching is another. At one point, I quit everything because I didn't need office work and devoted myself to teaching the dance. In the United States, people from various states of India are also learning Bharatanatyam. Parents come to me with respect for our culture for their children and with trust.

Indians treasure art. They never miss a single class. Non-Indians also learn. They are very curious about temples, sculptures, dance, and movements.

**Dance in Universities:** I am very interested in lecturing and conducting research in not only dance, but also art, history, religion, and philosophy.





I have been traveling to various countries since 1986. I have conducted dance performances and workshops at universities such as Princeton, U-Pen, Columbia, Cambridge (England), and Latvia, as well as at numerous colleges. I have danced at the Asian Heritage Week at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I have danced at Indian cultural festivals in various countries. I have lectured and danced at embassies of various countries.

Even those who do not know the language or art will enjoy my dance. When World Yoga Day was celebrated in Spain on June 21, I danced 'Uddhav Gita'. I danced 'Karna' in Dubai. I have performed as a representative of Indian art in various embassies. I danced at the 2024 Olympics. I danced 'Brahathishwarar' in front of 150 ambassadors at UNESCO.

When the Japanese ambassador requested me to perform a dance performance comparing Fuji and the Himalayas, I performed the performance at the Indian embassy in Japan. I have performed such different performances.

We can dance to the music of any country in the world. Our dance grammar is so diverse. When I recently went to Chile in South America, I danced to the rhythm played on drums called Pango. When I dance, it will be our Bharatanatyam. But the music will be different. Despite dancing so much, I will also participate in the Chennai Margazhi Utsav. I will dance in places including Thanjavur, Madurai, Trichy, Mumbai, Delhi.

Even though it's been over 25 years since I moved to America, I still spend six months in India and the other six months abroad. No matter where I am, I never forget the country and culture.

**Unforgettable events:** A pregnant woman who came to my dance performance in London was very depressed because she had miscarried three of her children. After the performance, she told me, 'I am now having my fourth child. If I touch you after watching your performance and leave, my fourth child will be fine with that vibration.' I saw the woman who went with her child the next year. It was a joy. That is the greatness of our art.

I was performing the dance show 'Karna: Child of Destiny' in Latvia. A woman said to me, 'My husband is a theater actor. He just left after seeing your show. He said he saw a halo behind your head when you danced. He said it felt like a shower of water while you were dancing.'

When I performed 'Karna' at the Indian Embassy in Dubai, a critic named R. Sayyat Abu Tahir wrote a beautiful review of it.

While dancing 'Brahadeeswarar' in Thanjavur, D.N. Ramachandran and Balasubramanian in Kudavai said, 'He has brought all our 50 years of research on the inscriptions into his dance as if he had seen it in person.'

When we dance at embassies, they ask about our dance, the costumes, ornaments, accessories, the hair we wear, the drawings we make on our feet, the background of the Bharata of the temples, and the techniques of the music for the dance.

**Awards and accolades...:** I have received many awards and titles, including the 'Kalai Ma Mani' of the Tamil Nadu government, the 'Nattiya Sooda Mani' of the Andhra Pradesh government, 'Nritya Ratna', 'Nattiya Kala Bharathi', 'Vishva Kala Bharathi', 'Kala Ratna', 'Kala Vipanchi', 'Kala Bharathi', 'Bharatha Kalavani', 'Talaikoli', 'Bharatha Nritya Seva Mani', 'Nritya Kala Ranjani', 'Drishti Puraskar', and the 'Proclamation' awarded by the New Jersey state government in the United States.

"Everything is important in terms of trust and respect for me. However, I think the Kalaimamani given by the Tamil Nadu government and the 'Bharat Nritya Seva Mani' award given by my guru Padma Subramaniam are special. I feel that these increase the sense of responsibility and encourage me to do something in the future," says Baladevi Chandrasekhar.