

MARGAZHI SPECIAL

In a chat with *DT Next*, Bala Devi Chandrashekhar speaks about *Mauli - A Timeless Tradition*, the inspiration behind it, and how the spirit of the Pandharpur Wari is translated into movement

THE LIVING LEGACY OF PANDHARPUR WARI

■ MERIN JAMES

Mauli - *A Timeless Tradition* is an evocative exploration of the sanctity, history, and humanity embedded within the Pandharpur heritage. Conceived, choreographed, and presented by Bala Devi Chandrashekhar, the production pays homage to the timeless values of equality, devotion, and motherhood at the heart of the Varkari sampradaya. Symbolically retracing the 250-kilometre wari from Alandi and Dehu to Pandharpur, the work follows the spiritual footsteps of saints and countless pilgrims, transforming the journey into a 'walking sanctuary' of collective faith. *Mauli - A Timeless Tradition* will be performed on December 25 at Brahma Gana Sabha, with additional performances after that date.

What inspired you personally to create *Mauli - A Timeless Tradition*, and what does the Pandharpur wari mean to you?

Mauli emerged from a deep personal pull toward living bhakti-devotion practised through the body, repetition, surrender, and community. The Pandharpur wari exemplifies this: a moving ocean of human faith that transforms ordinary roads into sacred space and everyday footsteps into prayer. As a Bharatanatyam artiste and research-driven choreographer, I was moved by how the wari carries devotion without spectacle through discipline, simplicity, humility, and collective yearning.

What inspired me most was the



Bala Devi Chandrashekhar

idea that a tradition can be both ancient and contemporary. Generations walk side by side: children, elders, householders, ascetics, each carrying their own burdens, hopes, and gratitude, yet merging into a single pulse of nama-japa. The Varkari path is not performance; it is a way of life. Translating this living spiritual practice into Bharatanatyam without turning it into a mere spectacle was the central challenge.

For me, the Pandharpur wari signifies three things. First, the dignity of devotion - the Divine is accessible to all, where love, not status, is the qualification. Second, a pilgrimage of transformation - the repetitive rhythm of steps, soundscape of abhangs, shared hunger, fatigue, laughter, and tears refine the inner self. Third, community as sacred architecture - the road becomes the mandapa, abhangs the mantra, shared cadence the tala; devotion itself creates sacred space.

Mauli is a personal offering to honour Maharashtra's spiritual and cultural heritage and bring its essence to audiences across geographies. It celebrates not just the darshan of Vitthala but also the inner journey of humility, endurance, and quiet surrender that makes one worthy of that darshan.

How did you translate the spirit of the Varkari journey into movement and choreography?

Choreographing *Mauli* required shifting from representation to embodiment. The Varkari path values constancy, humility, and inner alignment over virtuosity. The choreography is grounded,

cyclical, and emphasises walking, breath, and weight transfer.

The Varkari value of sa-ma-bhava, dissolving hierarchy, guided the movement: open, forward-facing, inclusive, free of dramatic flourish. Repetition mirrors nama-japa: familiar movements recur, but emotional density evolves, reflecting the pilgrim's inner transformation.

Abhinaya is inward-facing, emphasising subtle breath, gaze, and micro-movements rather than dramatic expression. Musically, the abhang shapes rhythm and energy, blurring the line between dancer and pilgrim, carrying fatigue, faith, and joy alike.

The choreography embodies perseverance, humility, equality, and love, inviting audiences to feel they are walking alongside the journey rather than simply observing it.



What do you hope audiences take away emotionally or spiritually?

I hope audiences leave with quietude, a sense of slowing, softening, and realigning within themselves. *Mauli* is designed to receive, not overwhelm, reconnecting viewers with a gentler rhythm of being that values depth over display. Spiritually, the work reflects the universality of devotion: faith requires only constancy and love. The wari becomes a metaphor for every inner journey toward meaning, healing, and truth.

I also hope it evokes shared humanity, showing how individual struggles dissolve into collective purpose. Finally, I hope *Mauli* instils quiet courage: the strength to keep walking, chanting, and trusting in devotion, which continues long after the curtain falls.