

REVIEW / REPORT

Mauli - A Timeless Tradition

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On the 8th of August, at Seva Sadan, Bangalore, Bala Devi Chandrashekar presented 'Mauli - A Timeless Tradition' under the aegis of Samskruthi: The Temple of Art. Mauli was not a production about the Pandharpur wari so much as an attempt to make the experience of the wari palpable through the body. This distinction was central to its achievement. Rather than reproducing the colour, spectacle and familiar iconography of the pilgrimage, Chandrashekar stripped the experience down to its essential elements: walking, repetition, collective rhythm, physical endurance, nama japa and surrender. In doing so, she transformed the stage into an imagined pilgrimage route and Bharatanatyam into a vehicle for exploring devotion as lived experience.

The annual 250-kilometre pilgrimage from Alandi and Dehu to Pandharpur culminating at the shrine of Panduranga Vitthala on the banks of the Chandrabhaga River, provided the production with its narrative framework along with selectively chosen Abhangs to highlight the exposition. Yet the wari was never treated merely as a sequence of events. It became a metaphor for an inward journey, where physical movement acquired spiritual significance.

The title Mauli, an affectionate Marathi term associated with the nurturing divine mother, carried this larger philosophical intention. It invoked Vitthala, the grace of the tradition and, equally, the inclusive ethos of the Varkari sampradaya. Bala Devi Chandrashekar's research driven approach, informed by her training under Dr Padma Subrahmanyam, enabled her to negotiate between historical material, saint poetry and classical dance without reducing any of them to illustration.

The most striking feature of the choreography was its refusal to equate spiritual intensity with physical virtuosity. She deliberately moved away from the spectacular possibilities of Bharatanatyam towards a vocabulary of walking patterns, repeated gestures, subtle weight shifts and measured breath. The body was not presented as an instrument of technical display but as the body of the pilgrim: walking, tiring, remembering, chanting and continuing.

This aesthetic restraint was particularly effective because repetition, an essential characteristic of pilgrimage and nama japa, became a structural device. Movement motifs returned repeatedly, but their emotional charge altered with context. A simple gesture could acquire a different resonance through repetition, just as the repeated utterance of a divine name gradually moves from sound towards absorption. She understood that the transformative power of pilgrimage lies precisely in this accumulated repetition.



Bala Devi Chandrashekar

Her abhinaya was similarly inward. Instead of relying on expansive facial expression, she worked through the eyes, the direction and duration of the gaze, small shifts in the body and the modulation of breath. Such restraint demanded considerable control. The result was a quality of stillness within movement that suited the spiritual temperament of the work. At its best, the choreography allowed the audience to sense devotion rather than merely observe its representation.

The early sequences depicting the assembly of pilgrims at Alandi and Dehu established the collective dimension of the pilgrimage. Bala Devi Chandrashekar, performing within the ekaharya tradition, negotiated between the individual and the collective with considerable clarity. Through changes in movement, stance and focus, one body suggested many bodies. The choreography did not attempt a literal recreation of a large procession; instead, it distilled its essence.

The opening Pushpanjali, followed by Adi Shankaracharya's Panduranga Ashtakam, established this contemplative register from the outset. The invocation consecrated the theatrical space and positioned the audience as participants in a journey. The wari was therefore introduced not as an object of cultural observation but as a process of entering, walking and surrendering.

Tukaram's "*Jai Jai Rama Krishna Hari*" and "*Udand pahile udand aikile*" gave these sequences their rhythmic and emotional foundation. The repetition of the nama, the forward movement of the body and the gathering of individual energies created a compelling sense of communal purpose. The choreography also subtly erased social distinctions. Child, elder, householder and ascetic appeared to share the same road and the same devotional impulse. The road became temple, footsteps became tala and collective chanting became an embodied mantra. This was one of the production's more significant conceptual achievements. She did not simply state the egalitarian philosophy of the Varkari tradition; she attempted to embody it through choreographic structure.

The Janabai episode brought the production from collective devotion to the intensely personal. Janabai, the domestic maid and poet, experienced Vitthala not as an inaccessible deity but as an intimate presence in her everyday life. Her treatment of this episode was among the evening's most affecting. Vitthala participated in ordinary domestic tasks, washing clothes and sweeping the floor, while Janabai responded through songs of gratitude and affection.

The power of the sequence lay in its simplicity. Domestic actions were transformed into classical vocabulary without losing their ordinariness. The relationship between Janabai and Vitthala was consequently not staged as conventional deity worship but as companionship and shared labour. This was an important choreographic decision, because it brought the Varkari philosophy of accessibility into the physical language of the dance. Divinity was not placed on a pedestal; it entered the household.

The Tukaram episode provided the production with its most substantial dramatic and philosophical challenge. The saint's abhangs were rejected by orthodox forces and consigned to the Indrayani River because devotion was not the preserve of those outside the upper castes. Bala Devi Chandrashekar approached this episode without resorting to melodrama. The emphasis remained on the emotional consequences of rejection and the saint's unwavering faith.



Bala Devi Chandrashekar

The subsequent return of the manuscripts, unharmed, was similarly handled without theatrical excess. "*Bolava Vitthal, Pahava Vitthal*" and "*Khel mandiyela valavanti ghai*" emerged as affirmations of a devotion that refused social boundaries. Here Bala Devi Chandrashekar's abhinaya acquired greater intensity. The body registered humiliation, anguish and surrender, while the saint's philosophical conviction remained intact. This section also demonstrated her ability to allow Bharatanatyam's formal grammar to carry philosophical content. Rather than explaining Tukaram's position, she allowed the emotional trajectory of the body to reveal it. The message emerged with clarity: the divine name could not be owned by caste, community or language.

The Narahari episode extended this argument into the realm of sectarian identity. Narahari, the goldsmith and staunch Shaivite, remained sceptical of Vitthala. Blindfolded, he was asked to approach the deity through touch. His fingers encountered a form he recognised as Shiva; when the blindfold was removed, he saw Vishnu. Bala Devi Chandrashekar treated the episode with admirable economy. The hesitant movement towards the deity, the searching hands and the gradual recognition were enough to convey the collapse of a rigid distinction. The scene functioned as more than a devotional miracle. It became a choreographic articulation of religious plurality. Shiva and Vishnu were not presented as competing identities but as manifestations converging within a single spiritual experience. In this sense, the episode reinforced the production's larger concern with dissolving boundaries rather than asserting difference.

The music was integral to this process. O. S. Arun's score avoided treating the abhangs as merely musical accompaniment to Bharatanatyam. Instead, it allowed their devotional and folk character to shape the atmosphere of the production. The vocals of O. S. Arun, Vinaya and Usha Raj, supported by a choral ensemble, created a soundscape that moved comfortably between the classical and the vernacular. The jathis composed and rendered by Sheejith Krishna provided rhythmic definition while respecting the production's contemplative pace. Tabla, mridangam, sitar, flute, violin, nadaswaram and shehnai contributed distinctive colours without turning the musical arrangement into spectacle. At its most effective, the music seemed to arise organically from the movement, suggesting the breath, footsteps and collective chanting of the pilgrims.

The integration of folk devotional material with Bharatanatyam was particularly noteworthy. Bala Devi Chandrashekar did not use folk elements as decorative quotations inserted into an otherwise classical production. She allowed them to influence the movement quality itself. This was consistent with the philosophical premise of the work. If the Varkari tradition challenged distinctions of caste and status, the choreography similarly questioned the rigid separation between classical and folk.

Such synthesis, however, carries the risk of diluting the formal identity of Bharatanatyam. Bala Devi Chandrashekar largely avoided that danger through her disciplined and charismatic handling of the classical vocabulary. The technique remained perceptible beneath the simplicity of the movement, while the folk devotional impulse prevented the choreography from becoming overly formalised. The tension between discipline and spontaneity became one of the production's defining characteristics.

The research behind *Mauli* was evident throughout. Bala Devi Chandrashekar's engagement with the writings of the saints, the history of the Varkari movement and the lived experience of the wari gave the work intellectual substance. More importantly, the scholarship remained embedded within the choreography rather than being presented as information. The production trusted movement, music and poetry to communicate what exposition might have weakened.

The concluding sections, depicting the awakening of Vishnu on Kartik Ekadashi, the return of the pilgrims and Pandharpur as Bhuloka Vaikuntha, brought the pilgrimage to its spiritual culmination. "*Dhanya dhanya he nagari*" carried the final passages with an understated luminosity. There was no attempt to manufacture a grand climax. The accumulated experience of walking, chanting, suffering and surrender provided its own resolution.

Long after the final image had receded, what remained was not any single episode or virtuoso passage but the cadence of the journey itself. *Mauli: A Timeless Tradition* succeeded precisely because it suggested that the pilgrimage did not conclude with the arrival at Pandharpur. The walking continued within the imagination of the viewer, where the ordinary act of taking another step had acquired the possibility of becoming an act of devotion.



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