

அமுதசுரப்

By R. Sanjeevi

The divine plays (leelas) of God and the devotional literature expressing them never cease to fascinate, no matter how often seen or heard. In the South, the Alvars and Nayanmars sang and rejoiced in devotion. In the North, saints like Mirabai, Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, and Tukaram enriched both devotion and literature; their divine experiences evoke sheer awe.

Bharatanatyam artist Kalaimamani Bala Devi Chandrashekar brought these experiences to life on stage. Based in the United States, she has performed in approximately 300 concerts across forty countries (including performances for UNESCO). In India, she regularly performs across several cities, including Hyderabad, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Chennai. She has conducted deep research and presented dance productions on themes such as Nandanar Charithiram, Uddhava Gita, Karna, The Thanjavur Quartet, and Krishnarpanam.



Recently, Bala Devi presented a dance production titled "Mauli" at Kalakshetra, Adyar, Chennai. While the Marathi word Mauli carries meanings like "mother" and "revered master," it primarily refers to Lord Panduranga Vithala, who protects his devotees like a mother.

For the narrative elaboration (sanchari) of a Tukaram composition, she wove in an incident from the life of Sant Narahari. Narahari, a goldsmith, was a devout Shaivite (worshipper of Shiva). He was commissioned to craft a gold waist ornament (odiyanam) for Lord Vithala. Because measurements provided by others were inaccurate, he went to the temple himself.

Refusing to look at Lord Vishnu, this Shaivite devotee touched the deity's idol while blindfolded. He felt matted hair (jata) and a serpent coiled around the neck—all the hallmarks of Shiva. When he removed his blindfold and saw Lord Vithala, his heart melted in surrender. Bala Devi's abhinaya (expressive facial dance) portraying this song on the oneness of Shiva and Vishnu (Shiva-Vishnu Abhedha) was remarkable.

Another episode was drawn from the life of Sant Namdev. A dog snatches a dry piece of bread (roti) from his hand and runs off. Shouting "Vithala! Vithala!", Namdev runs after the dog holding a bowl of ghee, concerned that the dry roti had not yet been buttered with ghee. The stories of devotees who see Panduranga in every living being recall the verse of Sama-darshana (equal vision) from the Bhagavad Gita.

Devotees singing and dancing in celebration of the Lord during Ashadhi Ekadashi and the stories of these saints felt like embarking on a sacred pilgrimage. Bala Devi performed this entire dance production solo. Posing with hands rested on hips, she embodied Vithala through graceful expression. Certain movements carried shades of the renowned dancer Padma Subrahmanyam. Her costume and adornments were elegant and immaculate.

Additional background notes mention that Bala Devi's great-grandfather, Neelakanta Sastri, was the preceptor who taught Sanskrit drama to Maha Periyava, and Swami Dayananda Saraswati was a maternal relative in his pre-monastic life (purvashrama).

Touch Him, He is Shiva; Look at Him, He is Vittal!