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Sages of Indian Dance Add Age to Wisdom

By Ananda Shankar Jayant | Published: 09th January 2016 10:00 PM Last Updated: 08th January 2016 04:37 AM

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The trajectories of people's lives are fascinating indeed. On January 11, 1936, two girls were born—one in South India and the other in Rawalpindi. Growing up with different life experiences, these young girls engaged with music and dance as part of their education.

Both stumbled into the world of dance criticism; both went on to be prolific writers and arts commentators, writing lucidly and with an in-depth understanding of art and the artist; both are sharp, incisive and candid; both don't mince words; they met and went on to become good friends; both are incredibly warm, supportive and compassionate human beings; both are elegant and gorgeous women with impeccable style and a great sense of humour. Leela Venkataraman and Shanta Serbjeet Singh, a Tamilian and a Punjabi, respectively, continue their four-decade affair with dance, as they turn 80 years young on January 11.



Leela mami and Shantaji, as they are affectionately called along with Sunil Kothari, or Sunil Bhai, form the triumvirate of dance criticism in India. Collectively and individually, they have transformed the way dance is viewed and written about.

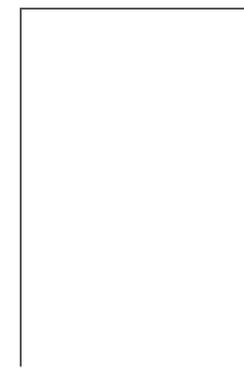
Over the last four decades, both have brought the ephemeral and ever-changing contours of dance through their engaging writing to the reader.

The writings of both, Shantaji and Leelaji, featured in leading newspapers. Both are writers sought after by dance journals across the world.

Soon the experiential knowledge gained by many thousand hours of watching, speaking, writing and ideating on dance, translated into seminal books on dance.

While Shantaji's book *Indian Dance: The Ultimate Metaphor* offered deep insight on what shaped classical dance in India, her writing oeuvre includes bestsellers like *Nanak: The Guru and America and You*.

A prolific dance writer, Leelaji's book *Indian Classical Dance—Tradition in Transition* was a detailed overview of seven classical dance styles of India, with historical and socio-cultural referencing even as she wrote an eulogy to the Kathak maestro—Birju Maharaj: *A Dancing Phenomenon*. Her latest, *Indian*



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Leela Venkataraman, (above) and Shanta S Singh



Leela Venkataraman, (above) and Shanta S Singh

Classical Dance—the Renaissance and Beyond, is a well-researched and analytical book that traces the progression of classical dance in India since independence.

These two feisty women continue to bring their abiding passion for dance, their optic of knowledge and experience to intelligent discourse on dance, even as they seamlessly capture and preserve the momentary and transient dance itself, with ink on paper for posterity.

For dancers, a good review of their performance, a photograph or even a mention in their books meant that the artiste had truly arrived. You could also cry on either of their shoulders, when you got a critical review, knowing that your artistic angst would remain a well-guarded secret.

Shantaji and Leelaji, dancers across the country join me in wishing you both health and many more decades of encapsulating Indian dance into the stillness of the word. As the fascinating trajectory of your lives entwine in the rhythm and cadence of dance, may you both continue to be showered by the blessings and grace of the Cosmic Dancer, Nataraja.

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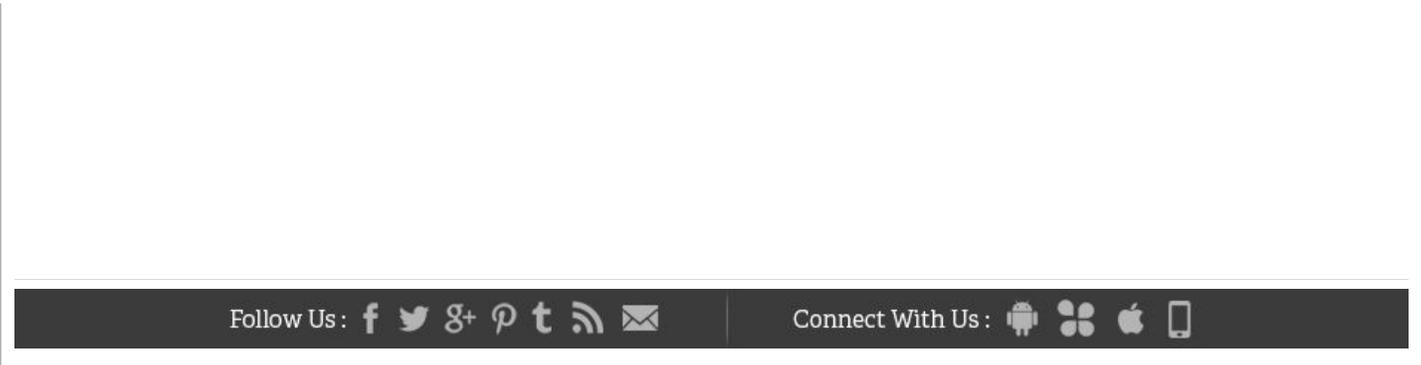
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