



SITARA DEVI
Akademi Fellow

Shrimati Sitara Devi is a living legend of Indian dance with professional career spanning over 75 years. Named Dhanalaxmi at birth, she was born in Calcutta in 1922. She was initiated in dance by her father Pandit Sukhdev Maharaj, a Vaishanava scholar of Sanskrit who taught and performed Kathak dance professionally. She later studied Kathak under Pandits Achhan Maharaj, Lachhu Maharaj and Shambhu Maharaj. She also learnt other dance forms including Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Western ballet, and some folk and popular dances of India and the West.

As a young dancer of promise, Sitara Devi performed at the Atiya Begum Palace in Bombay before a select audience including Rabindranath Tagore who described her as *Nritya Samrajnee* — empress of dance. Her first public performance was held at Jehangir Hall in that city. In the 1930s and '40s Sitara Devi danced extensively on screen working in the film industry of Bombay. She later stepped out of her career in the cinema in order to devote herself completely to Kathak.

By the 1950s Shrimati Sitara Devi had come into her own as a representative of the Benaras and Lucknow *gharanas* of Kathak. She developed her own dancing style characterized by an electrifying energy and evolved a presentation that gave full play to the entire range of the art of Kathak. Set to varying *talas*, the dance was interspersed with *gats* of lyrical beauty and compositions of dramatic intensity. Renditions of Thumris and Bhajans followed the *nritta*, performed by the artist for long hours. Sitara Devi thus represents the era of complete Kathak — all-night interactive performances in the presence of knowledgeable patrons and *rasikas*. Eminent Tabla players like Kanthe Maharaj, Samta Prasad and Kishan Maharaj were associated with her recitals. She continues to enthral the audience even today.

Shrimati Sitara Devi was conferred the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1969. She won the Padma Shri in 1973 and the Kalidas Samman in 1995. A recipient of the Ratna fellowship of the Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi, she was honoured with the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 2008.

For her contribution to Indian dance, Shrimati Sitara Devi is elected Fellow of Sangeet Natak Akademi.