

LIFE &
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PU LSE

SATURDAY, MARCH 26, 2016

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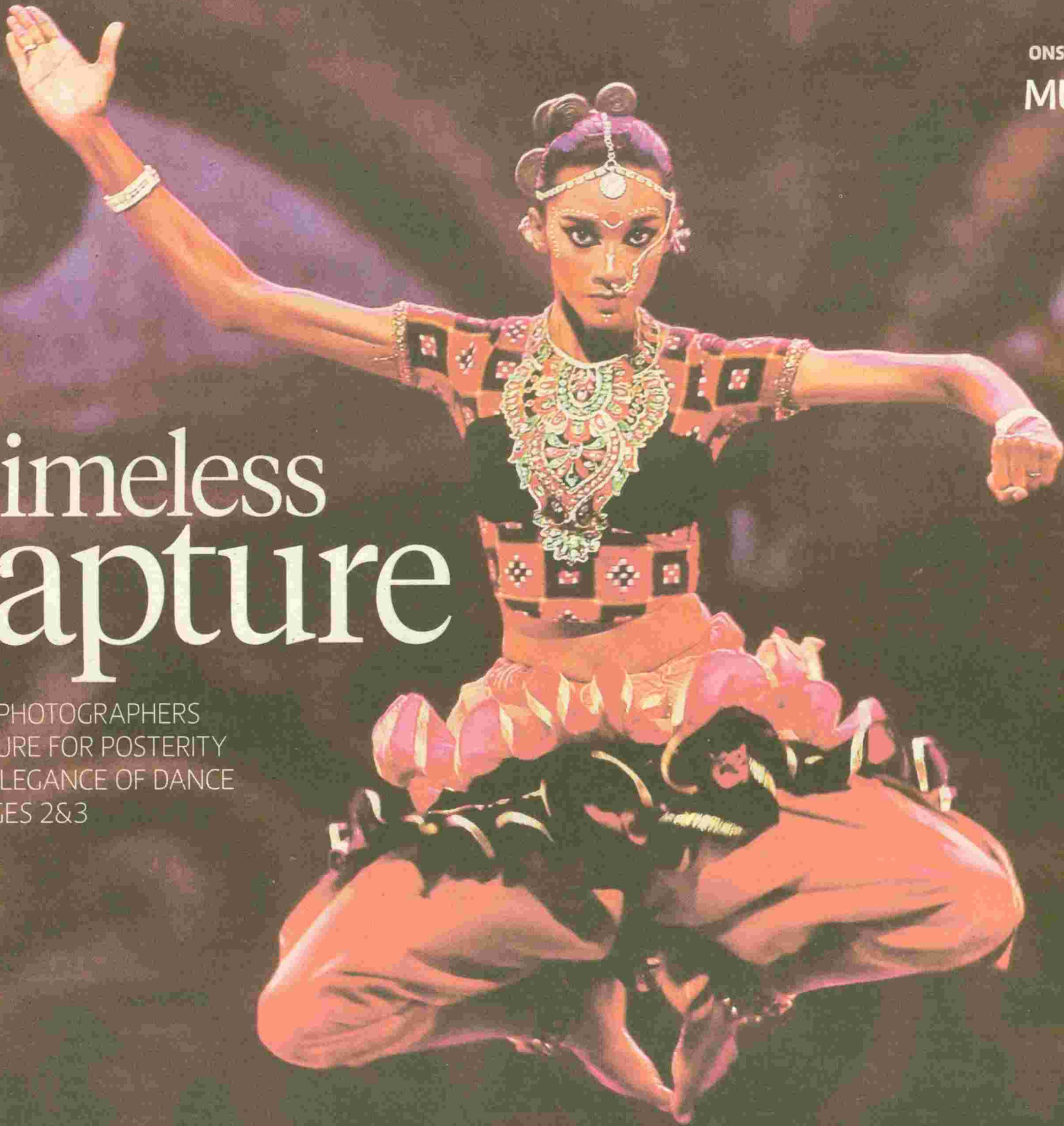
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Timeless rapture

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BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE & TIMES **PULSE** people

A MAN adjusting the bells on a woman's anklets; an incensed, but triumphant, goddess; dancers who adopt a self-assured, but supremely elegant stance. These are but some of the images in a recent photography exhibition called Ganjam.

While women dominate many of the images, there is another aspect to these photos and that's the stunning backdrop. This observation is confirmed by one of the two photographers in this exhibition, S. Magenthiraseelan (known to his friends as Magen).

The exhibition showcases photographs taken during an odissi performance (which was also called Ganjam) by Sutra's dancers last September at Istana Budaya.

The repertoire was inspired by the folk dances and musical compositions of Ganjam district in Odisha state which is steeped in traditional arts and culture.

There are 25 photographs altogether—14 photographs are by Magen and 11 are by A. Prathap.

WHAT Ganjam — a photography exhibition by A. Prathap and S. Magendran (presented by Sutra Foundation).

WHERE Foyer, Auditorium DBKL, Menara DBKL 1, Jalan Raja Laut, KL

WHEN Until March 27

EVERYDAY LIFE

Although both photographers are of Indian origin, their careers started in different countries. Prathap started his career at *News Today*, an English evening daily in 2004 and subsequently joined *The Times of India* in 2008. Today, he

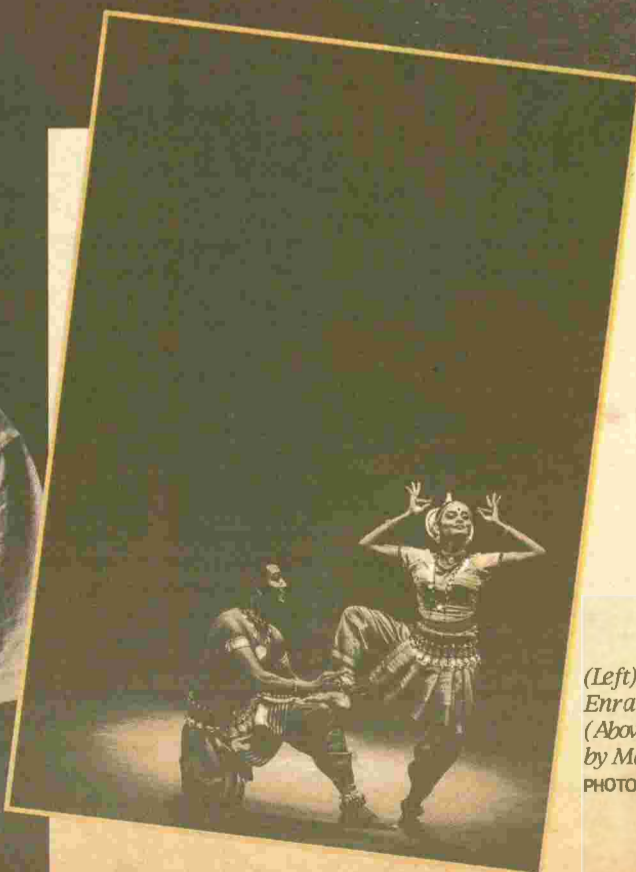
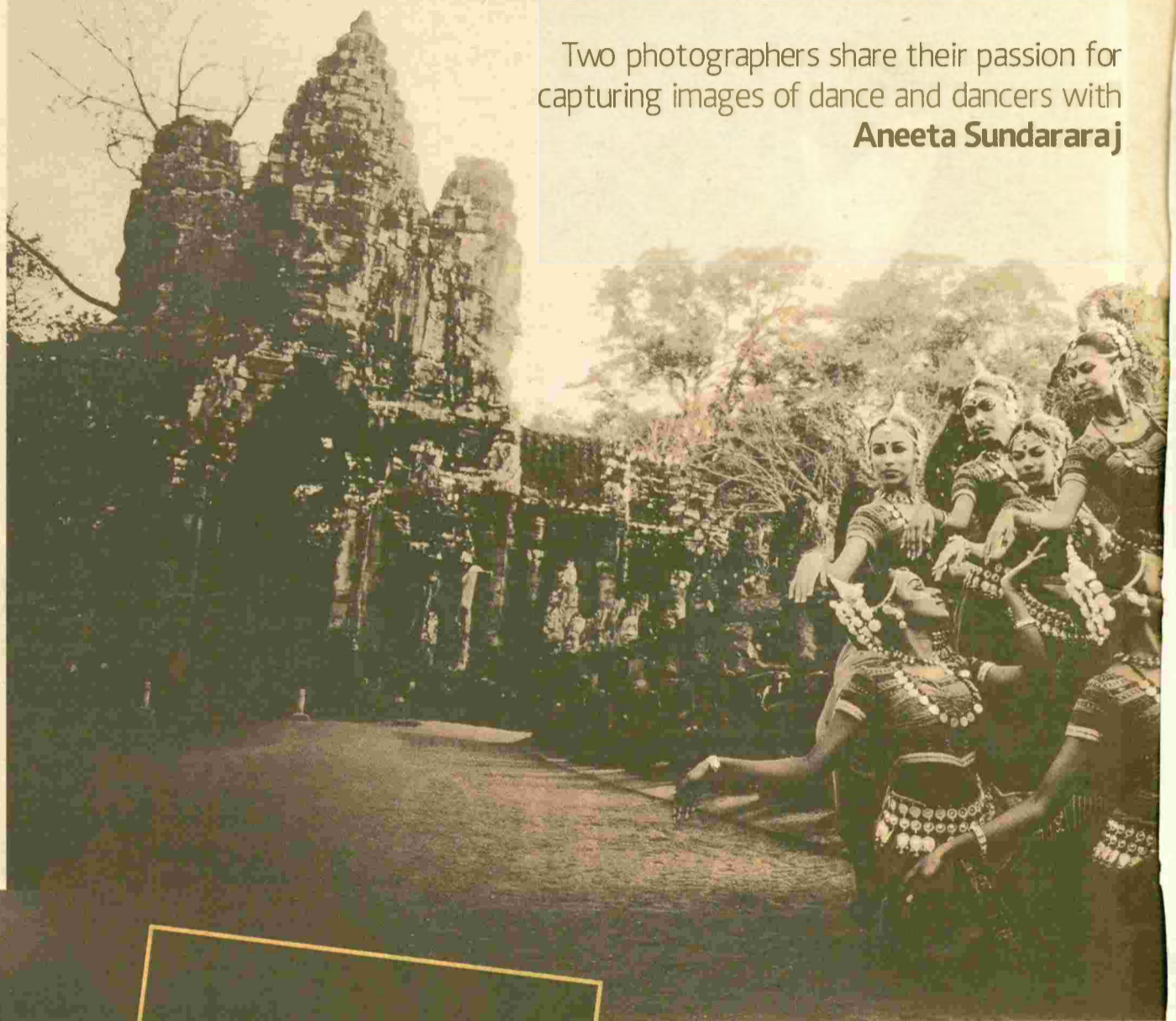
is the principal photographer with *The Times of India*, Chennai Edition.

Meanwhile, born in Mentakab, Magen's first career wasn't in photography. The third among five children, Magen's home has been Kuala Lumpur since he was 3 years old. Magen's face lights up when he recalls an idyllic childhood: "Every single day, from 4 to 7pm, we were in our *padang* (field) playing football."

It was a surprise to him — which he calls "a culture shock" — that, "even a

SNAPSHOTS OF BEAUTY AND GRACE

Two photographers share their passion for capturing images of dance and dancers with **Aneeta Sundararaj**



(Left) Magen, *Enraptured*. (Above) *Arabesque* by Magen.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUTRA

group of boys from a small *taman* (housing estate) could win matches and be recognised".

The 28-year-old's first exposure to the digital world came in the school's computer lab where the project was to create a simple website. This meant having to take images which could be uploaded to the site. It was at this point that he first laid hands on a digital camera which he borrowed from the school.

Throughout his studies pursuing a degree in Accounting and Finance, Magen had photography at the back of his mind. He observed things that others overlooked and regrets the lost opportunity to capture such moments: a man giving up his seat to an elderly woman on a bus; a kind passer-by paying for lunch for a man down on his luck; and children playing with each other. In this, he's influenced by the work of the eminent Indian photographer, Raghu Rai, whose works have been described as revealing "his affectionate stance toward both his inner circle and the wide world, and especially toward the 'everydayness of life'".

people **PULSE** BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE & TIMES

Magen and he elaborates: "The challenge is in not knowing what's going to happen next. And, you'll never see the same thing repeated."

One such experience for Magen was when he was invited to accompany the Sutra Foundation to Angkor. The photographs he took were published as a collection called *Sublime Angkor*.

He explains his methodology, saying: "I do my homework. I need to know what the dance is about because the image I take ultimately has to send a message. It's not a random shot. Get the right character, right movement, exposure and lighting."

A case in point is the photograph he took called *Five Muses*. Magen had seen the bas-reliefs of Cambodian *apsara* (celestial dancers) and decided that he wanted the Sutra Dancers to pose against this backdrop. "For me," he adds, "this is a classic composition of Sutra dancers whereby they seem to be the epitome of the *apsaras* coming to life."

Another is called *Arabesque* where the Sutra dancers spontaneously created a group composition with the background

of bas-relief depicting demons churning the ocean for elixir of immortality.

THINGS HAPPEN FOR A REASON

The collaboration with the Sutra Foundation wasn't as direct for Prathap. In fact, Prathap's story begins one evening in 2009. Although tired, he had to undertake an assignment to photograph Chennai-based dancer, Shanmuga Sundaram.

The photograph was published in the papers and the dancer wanted a copy. In time, Datuk Ramli Ibrahim, who's a friend of this dancer, saw the photo and requested a meeting with Prathap. After their meeting in Chennai, Ramli and Prathap have been collaborating on a regular basis.

For Prathap, this entire sequence of events reinforces his belief that no assignment is big or small. In fact, he says: "What matters is that we should put in our very best every time. And, of course, everything happens for a reason."

When asked to single out some of their favourite images in the exhibition, the photographers hesitate but Prathap

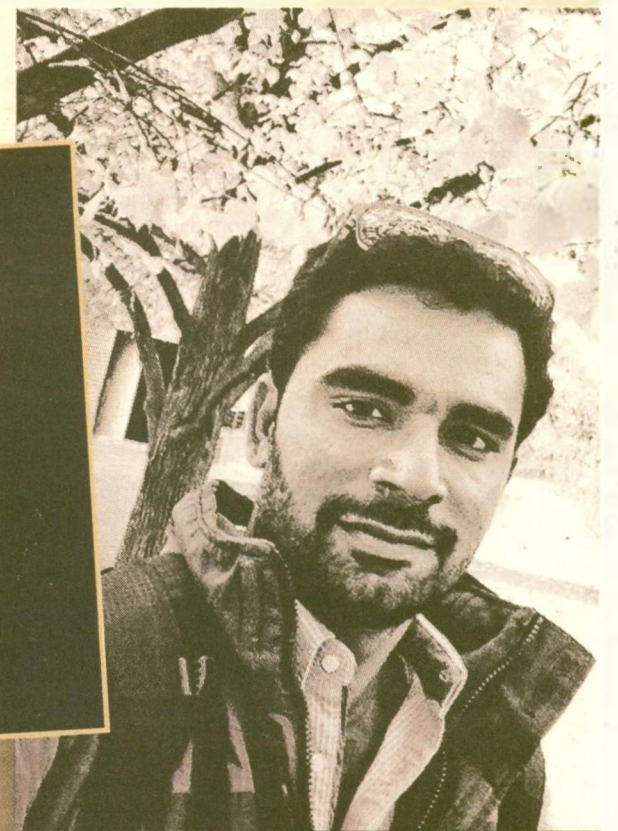
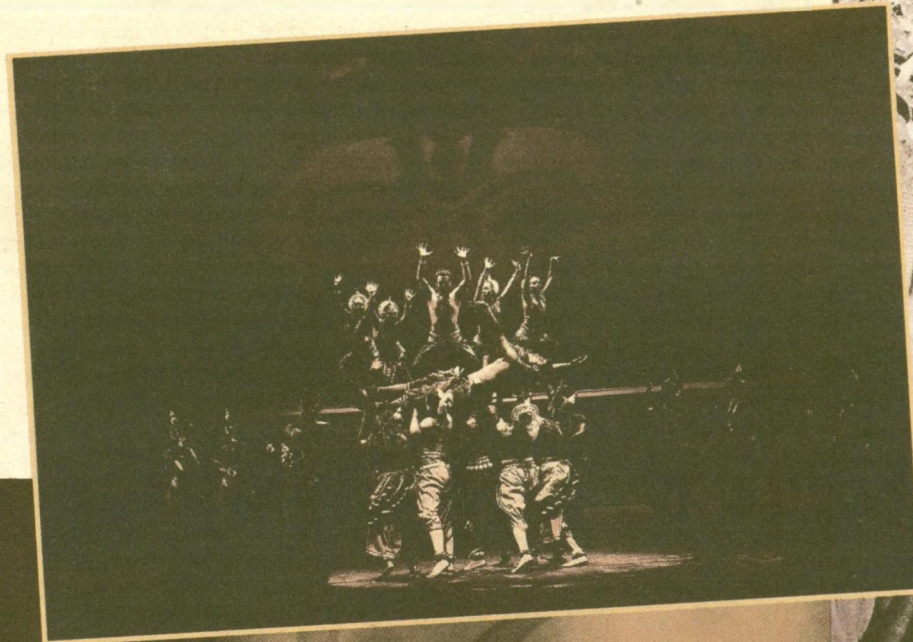
eventually says: "There are many such favourite images and it takes a lot of time to narrow down to a few when it comes to choosing your work for an exhibition. Each and every frame shot is close to my heart."

Still, Magen's first choice is his piece called *Reclining Narayana*. Together with Prathap's *Narasimha-hiranyakashi*, these photos are from the piece the Sutra dancers performed called *Mangala Charanam*. They depict a verse drawn upon the signature prayer song of *Prahlada Nataka*, the folk theatre form of Ganjam.

Both photographers also chose images from the dance piece *Yogini-Moksha*. Prathap's *Angry Yogini* is a showcase image that depicts the *piece de resistance* of the performance which reverberates on the theme of *Yogini*.

Concluding our discussion by reiterating his preference for portraying the dominant woman, Magen chooses *Triumphant Yogini* as his final piece, saying: "A *yogini* is a manifestation of the creative energy or *shakti* of Lord Shiva. She protects the ordinary folk by showing her valour and aggressive aspect."

(From far bottom) *Narasimha-hiranyakashi* and *The Ideal Couple* by A Prathap (Ganjam). (Right) Prathap.



CAPTURING DANCE

With money that he saved up, Magen bought his first camera — a second-hand Nikon D80 — from a shop in Low Yat Plaza in 2007. Since then, he's upgraded his camera four times. With the correct camera, he also realised his true calling was in photography and decided to make it his life's work. To make ends meet, Magen does commercial photography where he records social events, wedding and portraits. His passion remains capturing dance and dancers.

The 33-year-old Prathap says a similar thing. In fact, in the coffee-table book *Quintessential Sutra*, he wrote: "Performances look so easy, but that's far from the truth. It takes years of hard work and dedication for just those few minutes of beauty and grace. I want to capture for eternity the dedication and love performers have for their art and then share these treasured moments with others. When this magic happens, photography transcends mere documentation and becomes art."

It's that element of unpredictability in dance that fascinates his counterpart

