

HOMAGE TO GURU AMUBI SINGH

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The name of Guru Amubi Singh, the grand old man of Manipur, brings a number of images to one's mind. These images are connected with the cultural history of India during the last 70 years; his life and work provide the milestones covered by Indian arts, particularly dance in this century.

Ojha Amubi, as he was endearingly called in Manipur and outside, undoubtedly belonged to that verdurous land which has been the envy of not only human beings but also of the gods.

Nature has silently and unobtrusively shaped the character of the inhabitants of this valley; and so has it given a unique character to the dance style of its people. The sinuous, waving trees have left their mark on the undulating, unilinear movements of the dance. On the hills, there is a stronger and fiercer nature, with storms, wild animals and sudden violence. Tribals inhabiting the hills match the virility of nature with their dance.

The two traditions, that of Tribals and the Meities of the Manipur valley, of the Maibas and Maibeas, and the Vaishnavites, have flourished in harmony, co-existing and supplementing each other. For the younger traditions have not been uprooted or replaced the earlier ones.

It is often believed in the context of Manipur that Chaitanya transformed the valley into a Vaishnavite "temple" leaving little or no traces of the earlier traditions. This is not quite correct because these traditions continued, and still continue, even if they had a Vaishnavite veneer on them. Ojha Amubi was a true representative of this process of Indian culture where, while one form grew up of another, the original has not been lost or obliterated. It was perhaps this solid foundation of Meitei culture that enable the guru to be modern and, at the same time, a ruthless and uncompromising traditionalist, believing in the sanctity of the ritual, an unquestioned Vaishnavite bhakta

(devotee), and a modern experimentalist who did not fear to break fresh ground in life or artistic activity. He was pioneer in spreading the message of the Indian tradition in all its vitality, sanctity, capacity for assimilation and continued reformulation.

The *guru* began his life young and, so far as one knows, as a member of a family which had long served the Manipuri army. Dance was undoubtedly ingrained in him but his vocation was not that of a traditional dancer in the temple. His mother had, however, danced in the temples and had taken part in the varied repertoire of Manipuri dance form. She was inheritor of the Rasa tradition of Bhagya Chandra Maharaja being none other than his great-grand-daughter.

With the spread of the British rule to Manipur the father of the young Amubi was exiled. This exile proved to be a blessing in disguise as he was obliged to spend many years in Brindavan, more particularly in the Vaishnavite temple of Radhakund. It was here that the seeds of the Vaishnavite faith sprouted and flowered beautifully in the form of song and dance in the young Amubi.

From *braj-bhoomi* the leelas and *rasa* dances of Krishna had travelled to the secluded valley of Manipur. Now, once again, Amubi, amongst a few other, was instrumental in carrying the vibrant atmosphere of *braj bhoomi* with a new flavour back to Manipur. He returned to the valley a transformed man; while the life of action he did not forsake, in spirit he was a *bhakta*, dedicated totally and completely. Back in Manipur, his performance and extraordinary talent both in *sankirtan* (devotional songs) and the *rasa* tradition caught the eye of the Maharaja, and he was appointed court dancer and *guru* for many years.

Perhaps in recognition of the restlessness of the earlier years or perhaps destiny had ordained it so, the guru had to leave Manipur again. For he was apparently born to be a transmitter of the traditions from one part



of India to the other. This time he was sent out of Manipur with the command that he should propagate the art of Meitei dancing to other parts of India.

This was a propitious time, for this was also the time for the revival and redicover of the Indian traditon. The Bengal School was at its height; Tagore was looking for fragments of Indian classical traditons in music and dance so that he could recreate genre distinct from the prevalent nautch. The poet had been inspired by his visit to Japan and to Indonesia; he knew that his country too had the same traditons but it was not until he found genuine gurus of the same traditions and Manipuri dance forms that he was personally confronted with them.

The impressions produced by the Kathakali and Manipuri dance forms on the poet gave rise to the dance style which came to be known as the Santiniketan school of dance. Guru Nabakumar's and Guru Amubi's contributions was not minimal in this movement. They had sparked off an interest in a tradition with which the educated Indian was not acquainted. Soon there followed another movement on the return to India of Uday Shankar from Europe.

The message from Uday Shankar to the *guru* inviting him to Almora again reminded him of his ordained duty. Without a moment of hesitation he decided to accept the invitation. With him he took a young dancer name Mahabir Singh who had received training from Guru Amubi and had also been trained in the art of *pung* playing by other traditional maestros.

At the Almora centre there were doyens of dance from various parts of India. These included Guru Kandappa Pillai and Guru Namboodripad, among the pupils were Shanti Bardhan, Simkie, Amala Nandi, Narendra Sharma and others. The guru had known how to use the elements of Manipuri for dance dramas. Here he learnt to use the rich and intricate repertoire of Manipur dance for short, presentable numbers in a modern concert programme. For traditional master this could have proved fatal. He could have been uprooted from his tradition, swept away by the glamour of the stage. He could diluted the traditon and polluted it by a series of compromises.

But the guru was much too deeply rooted both in Brindavan and Manipuri to allow this. He taught, he composed, he insisted on the purity of the movement; the chastity of its execution was must, no matter what external form in composition it took. This then was the secret of his power.

The *guru* could be ruthless if the characteristic movements of Manipuri dancing, of the fingers and the wrist were not rendered properly. He could shout and weep if the foot contact was stronger or weaker than it needed to be and yet, when it came to compressing a four-hour vasant rasa to a 10 or 15 minute piece he could do so with ease. The *guru* also trained the eye to see the dance, and the hear correctly. This was the second phase of the *guru's* life.

After the Almora centre was closed and Guru Namboodripad and Guru Kandappa Pillai passed away, it was once again left to Guru Amubi to take the message of the tradition to different parts of India.

Amongst those who remember him in Gujarat are Mrinalini Sarabhai, the Jhaveri sisters and others. The wheel had come full circle : from *braj bhoomi* the *rasa* went to Manipur and from Manipur it was brought back to the Saurashtra region of Gujarat.

To Delhi the guru sent Mahabir, a true disciple, strict, uncompromising, imaginative and adaptable. But Mahabir Singh's carrer was cut short as he died in Delhi under tragic circumstances. Such a loss of a pupil so dearly held would have broken another guru's back, but not so Guru Amubi's. He offered to come to Delhi to continue the uncompleted task of his pupil.

For the first time in Delhi there was a realisation of the genuine, authentic Manipur style, as distinct from oriental dance. To Delhi he also brought another discipline, Babu Singh. Babu did not have the fire of a Mahabir but he had an unparalleled ability to imbibe subtleties of dance techniques from the guru.

The guru's pupils in Delhi will long remember him for the variety of ways in which he could teach movements exactly. He would make patterns on walls, draw lines on the floors, narrate anecdotes from the puranas, could mimic and if need be catch hold of the ankles to ensure accurate footwork; often he would

support elbows so that they would not limply fall down. He would gently move the head with his hands so that the feel of the movements could be recognised by the learner.

And if the pupil continued to be clumsy, heavy-footed, he or she would hear the roar of a lion. "Do not hurt mother earth", he would say. And gently the threats would turn into Saraswati's wrath who punished the dancer if he or she used an *ashuddha svara* (corrupt note) or rendered an *ashuddha* (wrong) movement. Dance was a part of his life, a vital instrument for cultivating the self, not a skill to be imparted; lack of vigilance was punishable in his life - and, in the life hereafter.

It was about this time that the Sangeet Natak Akademi decided to set up a training centre of Manipuri dance, known as the Jawaharlal Nehru Academy of dance in Imphal. The guru was invited to undertake this assignment. He was initially of two minds; he felt that his task in Delhi had not been completed. He had not been to impart the right recipients with sufficient knowledge. The words that he used were :

If I found a *satpatra* (a good recipient), I have not been able to give him enough. But often I have not found the perfect *satpatra*. Whatever I have is for the giving : it was given to me by Saraswati and Radha to be given away to others. When will I be able to give it all away to that I can repay my debt ?

This was another aspect of faith which continually inspired him to carry the message of dance. He was only the carrier of an art which was bigger, greater than he himself; it was his mission to transmit it. In this way alone could his life's mission be completed.

However, it was under his guidance that a strong institutional framework was established at Manipur ensuring the continuation of a classical tradition into modern times. While the guru was teaching in Manipur he sent Babu Singh to Bombay to enrich groups like the Little Ballet Troupe.

Such foresight and imagination combined with dedication are practically unknown in the modern

artistic world. Like a master planner of strategy, he spread the style to all parts of India. The guru as well as his pupils were traditionalist on one plane and bold experimentalists on the other.

An austere teacher, a strict disciplinarian and a meticulous keeper of institution's accounts, the guru was first and foremost a *bhakta*, a devotee for whom dance was only an instrument of transcending a narrow self to a godhood. This inner life of the guru determined his actions and also gave his dance just that quality which transforms the skill of the execution of movements to the creative art of ecstasy.

Out of his 90 odd years perhaps 70 years were thus spent in dedicated work. When government assistance was offered to him during his last illness, he refused it unequivocally. He wanted nothing for himself. If money had to be given it must be for the propagation of Manipuri dancing, for the recitation to the *Srimad Bhagawat* - or for the needy and the poor. For the guru death was no enemy nor a stranger; it was a milestone in a journey. If money could save man from dying why had kings and saints passed away? "Like all men born I too must die. My time has come and although my work is incomplete I hope that my disciples will carry on the work of Manipuri dance", he said.

Here then was an amalgam of a *yogi* of both the *karma marga* and the *bhakti marga*. He had played his part in life with vitality, with a sense of duty, of joy; but the guiding spirit of the activity was somewhere else. The still centre, which made him sing and dance the *padda* of *Gita Govinda* before the images of the *yugala* in *Radhakund* was the essence of this ease and abundance.

The words *sadhana* and *yajna* have been used in the context of the Indian arts from time immemorial; they stand for this inescapable demand for impersonality. The guru "lived" and "danced" the concept through every act of life, through every movement, through the sound of dance and music. How many of us know this in our being outside the intellect ?