

HOMAGE TO GURU AMUBI SINGH

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan

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