

THE END OF AN ERA

The Life of Guru Amubi Singh

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Wherein lies the distinctive beauty of Classical Manipuri Dance? How to enrich the existing tradition, provide a corrective to current practices and set standards for generations to follow? These are perhaps, questions which every great artist, *guru* or critic has to answer a number of times and the answers are to be evaluated again and again in the changing context of various dance traditions of the East and the West and in the case of Manipuri, of South-East Asia as well.

It was left to Guru Amubi to come to grips with these questions and provide answers in his own way. And he was great in the sense that he could combine in himself all the qualities of a great teacher and had the rare distinction of being the ablest exponent and foremost cultural ambassador of Manipuri Dance in India. Greatness was simply thrust upon him in this land where there is a splendour of artistic greatness in the field of Classical Manipuri Dance and traditional Sankirtana music.

Ojha Maisnam Amubi Singh (in Manipur, a *guru* in music and dance is called Ojha) was born in the Uripok area of Imphal, the Capital of Manipur, in the year 1881. His father Samu Singh, younger brother of Maharani Kumudini Devi, was a senior army officer, in the regime of Maharaja Chandrakirti Singh (1834-1844). He rose to the position of *Luwang Ningthou* during the brief reign of King Surchandra Singh. In the year 1891. Manipur staged its last freedom struggle against the British, which resulted in defeat and which sent Vir Tikendrajit and General Thangal to the gallows. Samu Singh, along with a few others was spared the death sentence but exiled for life to the Andaman Islands for the only crime of loving his fatherland. His son, Amubi Singh, inherited something of the courage of his father and besides being a sportsman, he displayed it in his life-long

struggle to carve an image of beauty for Manipuri dance. But it was his mother who initiated him into the world of music and dance.

“I learnt my first lessons in Manipuri dance at the feet of my mother” said Guru Amubi one day, And she was no ordinary mother. She was the great-grand-daughter of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, the principal architect of classical Manipuri *Ras Leela* (1764-1798 A.D.). In Manipur, there is the tradition of the queens, the princesses and ladies of royal blood participating in the various *Ras Leelas* held at the Royal Palace as a ‘must’, quite unlike the *devadasi* and other traditions of India. Here dance is a dedication and prayer and to be able to offer it to Lord Krishna and Radha at the palace is an honour and a matter of pride. Guru Amubi’s mother was also one of the principal dancers at the royal palace and it was natural that the son also would follow in the footsteps of his mother. One can imagine the height of artistic heritage to which the young Amubi must have been exposed at the Palace.

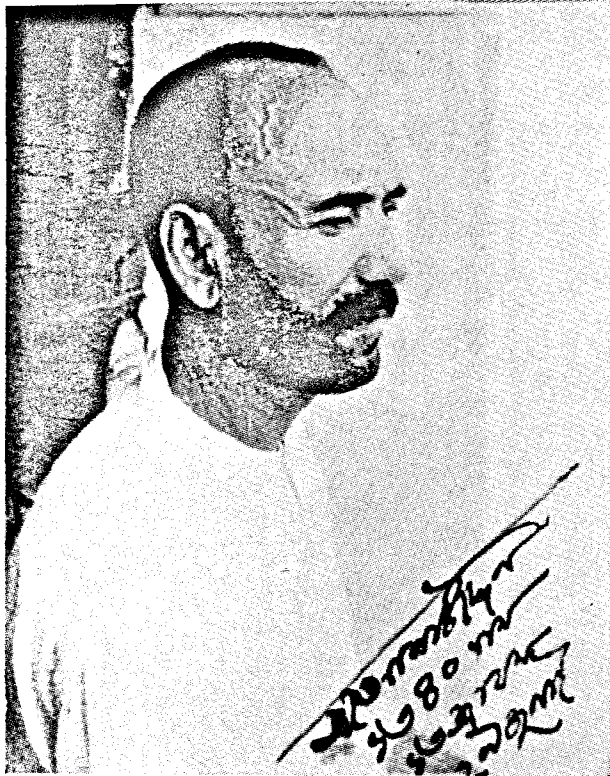
The child Amubi played the role of Krishna at the age of 7 in *Vasanta Ras Leela* where the *Rasdhari* (the teacher of the *Ras*) was Ojha Chura Singh. Guru Amubi also mentioned other great names with profound gratitude and with unshed tears: Phurailatpam Ojha Chaonu, Ningthoukhongjam Ojha Chaomacha, Maibam Ojha Keipha, Laishram Ojha Mangoljao and Sankhya (Rajkumar) Chandrasah and the list includes the *Sankirtana gurus* also, as *Ras Leela* happens to be an extension and illumination of *Sankirtana* tradition of music and dance. They were really great artists and *gurus* in their specialised fields and Guru Amubi felt humble while remembering them. It is also a fact that Manipuri Dance and music attained supreme heights and almost a renaissance during the reign of Maharaja Shandrakriti Singh. It was a golden age of Manipuri culture in the real sense of the term.

But the turning point in the career of Guru Amubi Singh was to accept the invitation of Smt. Tagore at Ahmedabad at the age of 30. He went there to teach and enjoyed the outer world opening before him. But the heat was too much for young Amubi and he had to come back home, after a few months. The late Haren Ghosh, the distinguished impressario of Calcutta, extended an invitation to Guru Amubi in connection with a dance tour and he joined the group for some time. It was rather an uneventful period and did not leave much of an impact on Guru Amubi, even though he had the proud privilege of introducing Manipuri Dances to other parts of India. But what appeared to be more important was the fact that Guru Amubi had been introduced to the world outside Manipur.

The meeting of great minds took place when Uday Shankar met Amubi and requested him to be a member of his troupe. Guru Amubi accepted the offer and joined the troupe in its extensive tours all over India. When

Ustad Allauddin Khan with Ravi Shankar (left) and Ali Akbar





At home in Maihar, 1933

*With Guru Shankaran Namboodri and
Guru Kandappa Pillai in Almora, 1942
(Photos: the author)*





Ustad Hafiz Ali Khan



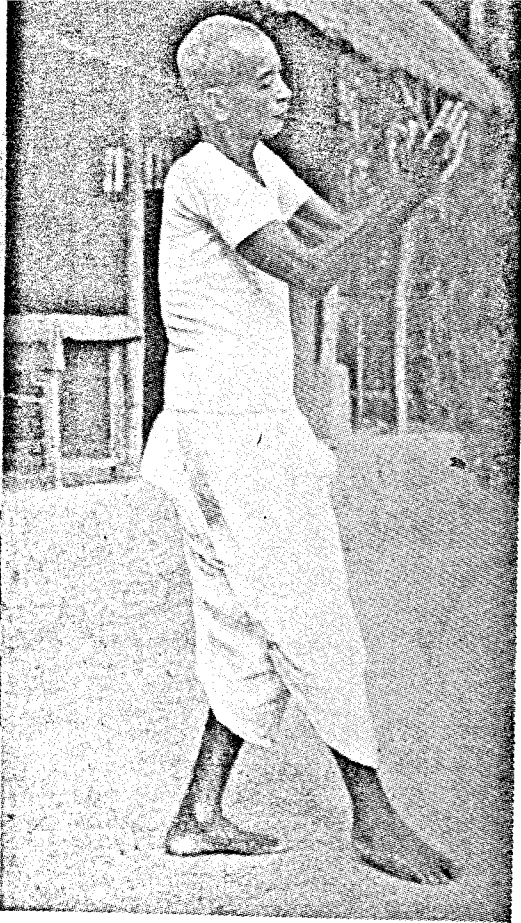
Ustad Hafiz Ali performing with the young Amjad on right



*Receiving the Akademi Award
from the President 1953*



Guru Amubi Singh



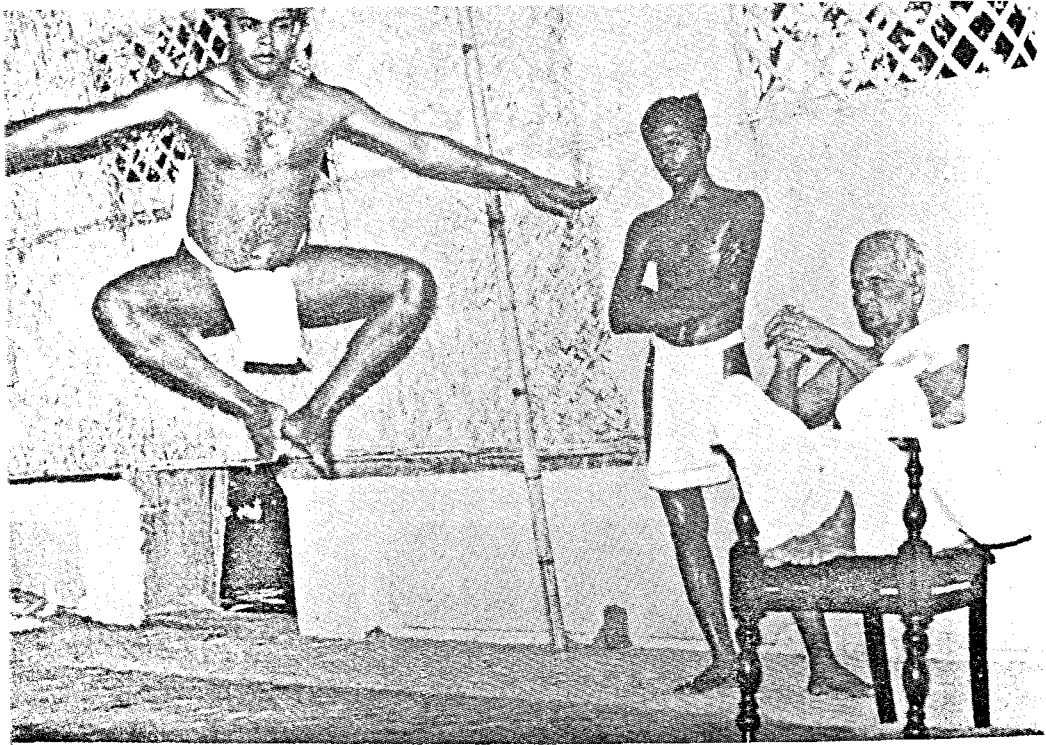
Demonstrating a step.



*Guru Amubi with the author, his
disciple (Photos: the author)*



Guru Kunju Kurup in performance



Above: Teaching at Kalamandalam. Below: Doing his own make-up.



Uday Shankar opened his Cultural Centre at Almora, more particularly for his Summer Courses, Guru Amubi was there teaching Manipuri Dance for about 6 years. This was just before the Second World War. Here a new world of creative compositions spread before Guru Amubi, which really opened his eyes in the field of *abhinaya*.

This is not the proper place for assessing the talents of Uday Shankar. He is also a great artist in his own way and it might possibly take some time for India to understand properly his contribution to Indian dancing. Guru Amubi often expressed his sense of gratitude to Uday Shankar for the way Shankar attempted to create a new beauty, a rediscovery of the classical dance traditions—not a mechanical repetition of past forms but a tradition enriched and reborn. Guru Amubi was very struck by this approach and he almost decided to enrich the classical forms of Manipuri dance by adding gestural expression within the framework of the tradition. Orthodox as he was to the core of his being, he found himself a captive, if he could not create a new awareness in his approach to dance. This he had to confess—as on many occasions he did—he learnt from Uday Shankar. What a refreshing humility on the part of a *guru* whom Uday Shankar acknowledged as great.

The post-independence Manipur marked a serious quest for identity and rediscovery of the classical tradition in the field of Manipuri music and dance. This trend was also initiated by the searching questions put by many scholars and artists from outside Manipur who took a deep interest in it. Special mention may be made of Guru Bipin Singh, recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1965) who questioned the complacency of the Manipuri *gurus* and artists in the field of research. Guru Amubi's residence at Uripok became almost a centre of pilgrimage, an area of confrontation for scholars and artists who eventually made remarkable contributions in enriching and propagating this art. Mention may be made of Guru Bipin Singh, Amala Shankar, Jhaveri Sisters and Dr. (Smt.) Kapila Vatsyayan. On the home front, Guru Mahavir, Smt. Thambal Devi, Rajkumar Singhjit, the talented Director of Triveni Ballet Unit (New Delhi), Kumari Suryamukhi Devi, Smt. Tondon Devi, Thingbaijam Babu Singh and Rajkumar Danisana deserve mention. It was a confluence of the various streams of outlook and culture, of the currents of research and disciplines. Guru Amubi was in his seventies by this time and became the most outstanding *guru* and an authority on Manipuri Dance.

With the establishment of Manipur Dance College (now renamed Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy) in the year 1954 by Sangeet Natak Akademi, Guru Amubi, as the founder-teacher, made it almost his laboratory and gave his whole-hearted devotion to the flowering of this institution. Every new item of presentation for the stage and even the decision about the controversial *talas* and *matras* carried the imprint of Guru Amubi's vision

and scholarship. As a matter of fact, Guru Amubi dominated not only the Nehru Academy but also the entire cultural field of Manipur for nearly two decades. He had to face bravely the problem of transplanting the temple tradition to the stage and to evolve a technique of short pieces, taking the strength and weakness of this new idiom into consideration. A series of new compositions of *Vasanta Ras* and *Maha Ras*, the dances based on the lines *Jhanta* and *Kalo Kalindi Kula Kanone* deserve special mention. Another composition on the lines of *Geet Govinda*—*Srita Kamala Kucha*, praising the glories of the Lord entitled *Sri Krishna Vandana* became such a piece of beauty that it was greeted by a gathering of artists and scholars at Jaffna (Ceylon) with continuous applause. The artist (of the Indian Cultural Delegation 1965) was Smt. Tondon Devi who carried this presentation almost to perfection.

Besides the traditional dance compositions, Guru Amubi gave serious thought to the creation of what is called ballet in Manipuri. *Sri Krishna Vallya Leela*, a one-and-a-half-hour ballet, presenting the childhood story of Shri Krishna upto the stage of *Ras Leela*, was shown before appreciative audiences in India. This composition has rich music and almost dispensed with vocal music.

After his retirement from Nehru Academy, Guru Amubi was still associated with it as visiting *guru* upto his last days and through another performing artists' group named Manipuri Jagoi Marup, established in September 1968, he directed another one-and a-half hour dance-drama (not a ballet this time) on *Geet Govinda* where lines from poet Jayadeva were rendered in distinctive Manipuri Kirtana style. It might be that Guru Amubi found the vocal music too precious to be dispensed with in his compositions and preferred to stick to the traditional style of dance-drama. It is a pity that Guru did not live to see the first presentation of his '*Geet Govinda*' in September, 1972. Needless to say this dance-drama has won high praise from the critics in Manipur and outside and it has been considered as the most beautiful composition of the *guru*.

In recognition of his outstanding contributions in the field of Manipuri Dance, Manipuri Sahitya Parishad conferred on him the title of *Nritya Guru* (1954). This was followed by the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1956. The Government of India decided also to honour the *guru* with the award—Padma Shri in the year 1968. But it is not the awards so much that really matter but the image of Manipuri Dance that Guru Amubi projected with particular reference to its future and also the impact left on the minds and hearts of many of his admirers and disciples.

And what did the Guru find in Manipuri Dance? Not much of the *shastric abhinaya* as some tend to emphasise nor an accent on tempo or vigour, in tune with the other dance traditions of India. But 'subdued

eloquence' as the *guru* stated in an interview. The tradition of restraint and dignity in common with such eastern countries like Japan and Indonesia and which poet Tagore found in Balinese and Javanese dance to a remarkable degree. Not expression so much but a dramatic reticence, spirit of restraint and dignity and of nobility: this is, perhaps, what Guru Amubi discovered in Manipuri Dance tradition. And this beauty, to paraphrase Beryl de Zeote, is to be born out of long meditation and experience. Perhaps Guru Amubi would accept the dictum of Ananda Coomaraswamy: 'The vitality of a tradition, persists as long as it is fed by intensity of imagination.'

I am tempted to conclude this article with a personal note. In a controversy about a book (*Govinda Sangeet Leela Vilas*) which almost rocked the cultural world of Manipur, I found myself in the opposite camp and had the rashness to call the *guru* illiterate through a column in an English daily. It hurt the feelings of the *guru* but a compromise came ultimately with my reaffirming my respect for the *guru* and what a sigh of relief Guru Amubi heaved and we became good friends thereafter and I believe, he forgave me also.

Senility characteristic of old age, never came upon Guru Amubi. He kept his mind awake and sensitive, even when his last moments were approaching. This is a remarkable feat on the part of a *guru* who breathed his last at the ripe old age of 92, (June 29, 1972). His passing marked the end of an era in Manipuri Dance.

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