

THE LEGACY OF AN ANCIENT TRADITION

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June 25th, 1972. Lying on his bed, a 91 year old man was speaking into the microphone of a tape recorder with a determined but palsied voice, crippled by an unrelenting cancer of the throat, set upon putting an end to his great life, but unable to dampen his spirit which had never known defeat. His mind was preoccupied with the problems facing the dances of Manipur. This was the grand old man of Manipuri dance, Guru Maisnam Amubl Singh giving expression to his views towards the betterment of the dance.

With only four days to count before his eternal rest and his feeble enunciation occasionally drowned by the monsoon rain and the croaking of frongs outside, the lucidity of his thoughts and the sophistication and elegance of his speech were intact inspite of his weak physical condition.

With her head reverently covered his daughter-in-law cleansed the floor in front of his bed and a learned Brahmin settled down there on a small mat and unwrapped the sacred *Shrimad Bhagavata* on a little book stand to begin his elucidation of the day's chapter. Reminiscent of Raja Pariskhit listening to this emancipating scripture, Guruji had been spending these last evenings of his life engrossed in the teachings of the great *Purana*, the eternal truths leading to salvation which he had been teaching all his life.

As the dusk of life approached and the borderland of the true and imaginary was within sight, he rejected the unreal by refusing to accept an offer of rupees five thousand by the government of India for his treatment and would accept the money only if it was meant for religious rituals and *shradhha* after his departure.

Ten days back in his characteristic humility he greeted Pandit Surchand Sharma, 30 years his junior with all the respects due to a Brahmin and said his goodbye as a matter of fact in good humour: "Please allow me to reach a few days before you". This moving statement soon gave way to a lively

discussion about the interpretation of a passage from the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, on which Guruji desired some clarifications, and expressed his gratitude when Sharmaji's exposition satisfied him.

It was till only a month back that he continued breathing life into the passages from the *Gita Govinda* by tirelessly composing tunes and dances on the immortal lines of Jayadeva. Always an inseparable part of Manirui worship, Guruji's dancing and singing were the most involved supplications to the supreme dancer, the player of the flute. When his physical body could no longer respond to his inner call meditation took over to continue the same dance.

The 29th June 1972 was like any other day in Guruji's house, the same stream of scholars, dancers and musicians was there but there was a palpable difference in the atmosphere. The lively discussions were conspicuously absent, everyone looked unusually solemn, silent and apprehensive of something none wanted to mention and each one wished what he thought was wrong. Though Guruji looked the same, talking to friends and students, the *Maiba* evidently thought otherwise. One of the most experienced traditional healer with age old skill and instinct which go beyond modern science, the *Maiba* in his low tone gravely advised Shri Upendra Singh, Guruji's son to get the small hut prepared and his instinctive reply was "No that can wait". Faced with such an undesired inevitability, who would not wish to stretch the present by a second and the next ...

A small bamboo hut with thatched roof is usually prepared about a day before someone's death. That will be made to stand in the courtyard of the house near the *Tulsi* plant about 20 minutes before the final breath and will provide a temporary shelter for the departing one. All the timing is carefully worked out as predicted by the *Maiba* who usually does not go wrong. A forecast far off the mark will seriously damage his reputation, as each step is associated with elaborate rituals which would then be upset. The small hut thus signified a point of no return and everyone respected Upendra Singh's feelings. But as the crucial moment was expected to be at two hours after nightfall, far away from the house under a mango tree some students were seen secretly fabricating the superstructure of what will be the last earthly dwelling of the great Guru.

Like every evening the Panditji was reading out of the *Shrimad Bhagavata* which had now reached the tenth canto, the five chapters of *Rasapanchadhyayi* signifying the union of the individual soul with the supreme one.

The sun gradually went down behind the western mountains, the day had now come to an end. As the world entered the realm of obscurity and slipped on its gloomy dark shroud, Guruji prepared to shed his earthly

garment and set foot on the road to awareness. Having changed into the saffron cloth of a *Sanyasi*, he sat up without any support to the utter disbelief of everyone and with folded hands most reverently received his *Diksha* as the Swamiji initiated him to the grand path of the *Sanyas*. Having chosen his course he laid down and asked for a leaf of the sacred *Tulsi* to be placed in his mouth. Closing his eyes for the last time, the great Nritya Guru peacefully joined the dance of the supreme dancer.

One was always struck by the unusual sophistication, refinement, dignity and humility of Guru Amubi Singh and this could be easily traced to his aristocratic ancestry. He was born on 21st November, 1881. His mother was a princess, the daughter of Senapati Sajouba and his father one of the highest ranking military officers of the state and brother of Maharani Kumudini. His father was also one of the head *Pung* players at Govindji's temple and thus was a respected figure of the land.

As was usual of the daughters of princely households, his mother Sanachoubi was an accomplished dancer and later on became a *Sutradhari* of the *Rasalilas* because of her talent in singing. Born and brought up in an atmosphere of nobility and high culture, the little Amubi's inborn talents found the most felicitous surroundings to flourish. Under the adoring eyes of his parents and the able guidance of his teachers, the future Guru Amubi was hardly five years old when he played the role of Krishna in a *Rasalila*. He also took part in *Nupamacha Pala*, *Sansenba* and *Gouralila* regularly.

Seeing the way the young Amubi was put to such a rigorous training of all the traditional arts of dancing, singing and drumming along with his warrior father's skill of sword, spear and wrestling at such a tender age, one starts wondering if his parents had a premonition that the family was not going to remain united for too long and wanted to make him as self-sufficient as possible.

The year 1891 found Manipur in turmoil and the British were quick in siezing that opportunity and invading the state. The great Manipuri warriors fought with legendary valour but lost the battle in the unequal fight against a mighty empire whose soldiers were equipped with sophisticated fire arms. Like caged lions the Manipuris roared in anguish when Yuvraj Tikendrajit and General Thangal were hanged on 13th August 1891 and Maharaja Kulachandra along with Guruji's father Colonel Samu Singh were deposed to the Andamans. Recalling the saga of Manipuri heroism in this battle, a school of narrative singing named *Khongjong Parva* was born and Manipuris never tire of listening to it.

With the most unexpected turn of events, young Amubi Singh was suddenly faced with a frightfully obscure future and to add to it his mother

left the world while he was only 11 and his elder brother too followed her soon.

British soldiers were seen roaming around the town on horse back terrorising the people but failed to subjugate the Manipuri spirit. The officers' residence was burnt down many times, there was a women's revolution against unacceptable British rules and seven princes were jailed and exiled out of Manipur for delivering anti-British speeches in the market place. Caught in the midst of this unsettled state, young Amubi saw a ray of light when he was informed that Maharaja Kulchandra and his own father were released from the Andamans and were allowed to stay at Radhakund near Vrindavan. He soon left Manipur to join his father and in that peaceful abode of Radharani pursued his art education for seven years under his father and also became well versed in Vaishnavite literature. This explains why Guru Amubi Singh could speak Hindi so fluently.

Maharaja Churachand Singh, was a child when he was installed in Manipur and the British political agent was acting as his regent. A new palace was built as also the new gold domed temple of Govindji. Life had gradually returned to normal and the tradition loving Manipuris resumed their religious dances and music woven around their everyday life. All the *Loisangs* attached to the temple of Govindji regulating the cultural, social and religious life of Manipur under the royal seal were again functioning with renewed vigour and the valley was once again the fairy kingdom of music, dance and learning. This was the Manipur that Maisnam Amubi Singh returned to after the death of his father. With his widened outlook he plunged himself in the study of dance and music from various Ojhas (Gurus). Those were the days of great teachers like Konsam Chura Singh, Phurailatpam Chaunu Sharma, Ningthoujam Chaumacha Singh, Maibam Keipha Singh, Laisram Mangoljao Singh and Gurumayam Amu Sharma. Each one of them was a giant in his own field and Guru Amubi Singh had the good fortune of learning from all of them. It was however the exceptionally graceful style of Ojha Jhulonmacha Singh that found the most able exponent in young Amubi Singh.

Responding to any sophisticated art form Manipuris were always appreciative of other kind of music and dance also and were keen to learn them. For this purpose a few selected artistes were sent out of the state to study at various centres in India and competent Gurus from outside were also encouraged to come and teach in Manipur. In 1801 during the reign of Maharaja Chourajit Singh an institution named Jagoi Sabi Loisang was established to specialise in these outside arts. Singing of *Dhrupad* and *Khayal*, the reverberating rhythms of *Pakhawaj* and *Tabla* along with the sound of other instruments like *Sitar* and *Esraj* kept this Loisang always alive. Young boys dressed as girls with ghunghroos on their ankles performed what the Manipuris called *Marbak Jagoi* or the alien dance. Guru Amubi Singh was

chosen as one of the nice looking boys to dance in this *Loisang*. This explains how a strict traditionalist like him had a very wide outlook and could appreciate other forms of dance and music. This institution was however destined not to live for very long and a devastating flood in 1911 destroyed its building and it was closed down permanently.

Organising a *Rasalila* and making one's own child play a role in it is a religious and cherished desire of every Manipuri parent. They spend a fortune in fulfilling it without any hesitation. *Rasadharis* or the teachers are the directors and choreographers of these *Lilas* and the whole community is out in their best attire to share the religious and aesthetic experience on the day of the performance. In this highly competitive field Guru Amubi became a well known teacher at a very young age. The visit of a turbaned official from the *Pala Loisang* (the royal office controlling all the dance and the music of the state) asking him to play the *Pung* at a *Gosthalila* at Govindji's temple was indicative of the royal recognition. After the death of Ojha Jhulonmacha, Guru Amubi became the *Rasadhari* at the royal palace. His talents were no longer a secret and he was showered with invitations to teach *Rasalilas* and *Gosthlilas* at various places in Manipur.

The year 1937 turned out to be an important landmark in Guru Amubi's life as also in the cultural history of Manipur. His Highness the Maharaja of Manipur, Sir Churachand Singhji wished to send a troupe of dancers to Calcutta to perform *Rasalila* and Guru Amubi Singh was asked to lead it. This unusual royal desire was considered outlandish by many, as none could in those days think of a *Rasalila* being ever performed anywhere outside the precincts of a *Rasamandal*, strictly according to the rituals, let alone its being presented in a modern theatre in a far off metropolis. The only form of dance performed in the theatres in those days was the 'oriental dance', a kind of dramatic dance with no roots.

In the beginning the Calcutta programme ran into trouble, as the Guru considered most of the compositions sacrosanct and was not willing to either change or edit any portion of his six hour long performance. It was after much persuasion that the recital was brought to a reasonable length and this first ever genuine Manipuri classical dance performance outside the state was an eye opener for the art world and was an instant success. Shri Tarun Kumar and Thambal Sana Devi were some of the dancers who featured in this programme. The spontaneous admiration by Sarojini Naidu, the nightingale of India, after the performance is still remembered by many.

The next all India tour by the impresario Haren Ghosh got into trouble as the troupe's Manipuri Brahmin cook, whose wife was also a dancer, died of pneumonia in Bombay. Those were the days when orthodox Manipuris were extremely fussy about who prepared the food and always made

arrangements for their own cooking. It was during this tour that Guru Amubi Singh came in contact with Uday Shankar, leading to the Manipuri Guru's teaching at the Almora centre for four years. The association with Uday Shankar opened up a completely new area in Guruji's thinking and his latent genius as a creative artist got fully awakened, giving rise to his many new works in chaste Manipuri technique. He was a most unusual combination of an old fashioned teacher who was very much sought after for his uncontaminated and dignified style in training the traditional *Rasalila* and one who was completely at home in modern stage presentations of impeccable Manipuri dances and each one of his composition is now a cherished gem of art.

Born and brought up during the last century in the midst of an exclusive world of Manipuri aristocracy, the epilogue of a myth-like civilisation with its caparisoned elephants, well groomed horses, ornamented palanquins, puffy expansive umbrellas, turbaned officers, ornate speeches and measured behaviour, Guru Amubi Singh could adapt exceptionally well to the new world around him. His discerning and penetrating appraisal of other schools of dance and music surprised many and unnerved several professional critics. Completely at home in the company of scholars like Pandit Atombapu Sharma with whom he had an unusual rapport, he was happy with and had immense patience for young novices who were as young as his grand children.

"How was the performance?" He inquires after staging one of his compositions. "It had some unmanipuri elements", answered the outspoken Prof. Tombi Singh. Two days later Guruji informed the professor that his statement was correct. One has yet to come across someone like Guru Amubi Singh who accepted criticism without any grudge. In fact he seemed to welcome it.

It indeed is gratifying to see true humility born out of eminence and confidence and Guruji was an epitome of it, and was quick to appreciate quality in anyone whether big or small. He used to send his students to learn from any teacher who according to him would do a better job than himself in any particular branch of knowledge. He had great humility to admit that in the process of teaching at Uday Shankar's centre in fact he had learnt a great deal. Besides being the most graceful dancer, his ability to outthink anyone in composing dances was truly amazing. He could find the most beautiful and unusual solution to almost any impossible dance situation.

"If it is not beautiful it is not correct" he used to tell his students. A real artist with a keen awareness of beauty, he was extremely demanding in getting the subtleties of movements and kept on devising immensely imaginative methods to transmit these difficult elements to his disciples. This is where he excelled. Most teachers would stop at the gross realities of the

movements. This explains why he so often remembered the sayings of Nityaibad Sanakhwa (Rajkumar Sanajaoba Singh), one of his teachers who was primarily a *Sankirtana* singer. The Sanakhwa, an unusual aesthete and a genius could with his magic touch bring beauty to any art whether singing, *cholom*, dancing (*jagoi*) or drumming. And performers from every discipline used to seek his guidance for that extra something which made for the great art. Guruji's thinking was very much influenced by this great personality.

Inseparably intertwined as they are, the trees of life and art in Manipur provide sustenance to each other and blossom forth in every season in the immense variety of religious dances and music of the land. The verandah of Guruji's residence invariably manifested a miniature world of Manipuri cultural calendar all the year round.

Leading off from a lane in Uripok, as one pushed aside one by one the long bamboo poles, secured in the holes of two large bamboo pillars on both sides, to open the gate to Guruji's house one could hear the voices of a dozen women singing in unison a prayer to Parvati. The training for a women's *Sankirtana* was in progress for the forthcoming Durga Puja. As one walked further, passing the cowshed and the vegetable beds, one could see Guruji seated crosslegged in the middle, engrossed in teaching the nuances of singing by keeping time on the mat with the wooden mouthpiece of a rubber pipe, the other end of which was connected to his *Hookah* with its *chilum*, smoking away. Next month would be another group learning a different song for some other festival till the circle became complete.

In the midst of his daily routine of attending to his garden, looking after his cows and the extensive *Pooja*, he always found time for his students, who were waiting patiently to get their dance lessons. Most of the afternoons were taken up in *Rasalila* training in various localities where he attended to the more difficult parts of the preparations, while his senior pupils took care of the simpler portions. The regular disciples in those days did not pay him anything and only assisted him in his work everywhere. Incidentally many more dancers and teachers of merit were regularly produced under the old system compared to the well organised expensive modern institutions.

Assisting him in any *Rasalila* training was a great education. The students were often asked to compose appropriate dance pieces within a given framework. With innovative fresh ideas these new works were created under his supervision, to suit the varying talents and abilities of different dancers. Few will remember that *Mandila Cholom* or women dancing while playing the *Manjiras* was created by Guruji. Before this the instrument was used only for keeping time.

His mission of propagating Manipuri dance took Guruji to various centres in India including Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay and Ahmedabad. At home the Nrityashram school of dance enjoyed his guidance and the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy thrived under his supervision. He left his indelible mark on the basic dance style of the institution. The honours he received besides the Sangeet Natak Akademi award and Padma-shri are too numerous to mention.

In the traditional Manipuri society people are respected for their age and background. In a social gathering or a feast an old Brahmin of the locality, however poor he may be, will be offered the place of honour and the rest will follow according to a strict protocol of age and background. Guru Amubi was certainly one of the most respected members of the society and especially in gatherings of artistes his word was the word of authority. It was the most pitiful sight to see him unable to speak in a seminar because of the cancer of the throat. Like the powerless Pandavas after the Mahabharata war the great man looked on helplessly when the younger half-wits were shouting at the top of their voices.

For sheer moral courage anyone will be proud of gentlemen of his generation and upbringing. During a visit to Delhi he was badly hurt in a car accident and the doctor who attended to him could not believe his eyes when he saw Guruji seated with closed eyes and did not utter a single cry of pain while his head injuries were being stitched.

His profound gratitude for any little thing done for him immediately reflected a vast charming world of an ancient civilisation and culture. It always reminded us of certain eternal values in human relationship. "Her love for me is that of a mother for her child" he said of Sarla, one of his disciples as she attended on him during his injury in Delhi.

On the fateful night of Thursday, the 18th day of *Jyestha*, everything was quiet outside. The threatening monsoon clouds had also cleared, leaving an unusually bright moon as is possible only in the rainwashed sky of Manipur, and whole valley now asleep, was cloaked in the white clothing of undiluted moonlight. After the elaborate rituals Guruji's mortal remains headed towards the riverside as he proceeded on his last journey.

Reflecting the heaviness of the mournful moment the *Pung* and the *Jhanj* sounded the *Nam Taka*, the rhythm of funeral procession gloomily breaking the stillness of the night. The touching figures of the numerous mourners; sobbing women with covered heads, and sombre faced men fighting back their tears, following the cortege with doleful steps, with the musicians singing Hari's name, all gradually disappeared from the sight and the sound of the music slowly faded into the death of the night.

The next morning Manipur woke up to a world without the great Guru, and was left only with a memory to be cherished, and revered, of the legacy of an ancient tradition which he carried for a good part of two centuries.

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