

# GURU AMUBI

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Guru Amubi is a great name in Manipuri classical dance. He was rightly considered the leading figure of the great contemporary trinity, Amubi-Atomba-Amudon. Those who have made some study of Manipuri dance in the present context are already aware of the valuable role played by the trinity in giving a new trend to the ancient classical form during the last few decades.

The Manipuri traditions which developed over the ages in isolation from the rest of the country, and for that matter the rest of the world, upto the turn of the century were exposed to powerful currents of external influence as means of communication between the State and the rest of the country were enhanced speedily. Exponents of Manipuri dance moved out of the State into the vast national mainland where they received generous patronage and sincere learners among the cream of the society. Thus, Manipuri dance was no more confined to Manipur, the land of its origin. It earned its pride of place as one of the classical dance forms of the country. The introduction of Manipuri classical dance as a subject in the Vishwabharati University as desired by Gurdev Rabindranath Tagore, use of the Manipuri technique in the composition of group dances in the Hindi films, opening of training centres in the leading cities of the country, all these factors contributed to invigorating the Manipuri dance movement towards a new trend which did not confine to this region alone.

The Manipuri classical dances which were traditionally performed in *mandapas* before the deities surrounded by congregations of devotees, could not any more be confined to the *mandapas*. They had to be taken to the stage to meet the requirements of the changing times. This transition was a great challenge to the exponents of the art. Most of them were products of the orthodox trend and were not prepared to compromise with the new situation. Only a few among them ventured to step into the challenging situation. Only a few of such exponents could come out into the lime light. Either they failed to adjust themselves with the new requirement or they

were over exposed to external influence so that they stood neither here nor there, completely maimed, they could not continue as exponents of the pristine Manipuri form.

The trinity Amubi-Atomba-Amudon emerged victorious out of this crucible. Each one of them had his own contact with the art lovers from outside Manipur mostly as their disciples. Guru Amubi Singh through his association with Uday Shankar toured extensively all over the country and his disciples were not confined to any particular region of the country. Guru Atomba had a long association with Shantiniketan while Guru Amudon had his outside contacts through his disciples like Kumari Savita Mehta.

Guru Amubi once told me; 'Look, a good disciple can easily influence a *guru* in many ways'. He was referring to one of his disciples from Madhya Pradesh who was extremely meticulous in taking down the lessons given to him by the *guru*. The particular disciple happened to be also a painter who wanted to record every movement of the body graphically marking the angles as accurately as possible. Pointing to the disciple, the Guru remarked in a light vein that he had made him work harder measuring the angles of every movement of the different parts of the body. He also added that in a way the disciple was a teacher to him. Before and after the classes at home or in the teaching institutions, Guruji would discuss matters with the disciples. He not only took delight in those discussions but also derived benefits from them.

It was sometime in the early sixties. The present complex of the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy had not been completed. The classes and the college administration were being run in the western Hall of the Johnstone Higher Secondary School. Guru Amubi was busy giving finishing touches to his new composition now entitled *Krishna vandana*. The new composition was introduced for quite sometime as *Sritakamala*. This particular composition has become a masterpiece, almost a trend setter in Manipuri classical solo dance repertoire.

I am referring to this composition for many reasons. As the rehearsals of the said composition were in progress there was a serious criticism against the Guru for alleged interpolation in the pristine Manipuri tradition by grafting other styles into Manipuri. I remember vividly one occasion when a few critics and I took full advantage of Guruji's magnanimity by heaping all sorts of criticism amounting to our disapproval. A few days after the incident, Guruji told some of us that he had decided to recompose the piece in the light of the criticism which he upheld after prolonged self examination as he admitted later on. During another discussion on the subject, Guruji admitted that in his sub-conscious, the impact of the contacts with the other styles always lingered. He admitted that special care had to be taken in new compositions to retain the purity of the Manipuri style.

In the last phase of his career as a teacher, whatever little influence he had imbibed from the exponents of the other styles with whom he had come into contact in his middle age was totally shaken off. He could develop a style within the bounds of the tradition with such success that *rasa* performances under his direction, bore the inimitable impression of his touch. It was very much different from other directions. This period was the best part of his long career. It was during this period that some exponents of the Manipuri classical form started a crusade against Guruji. The crusade was led by a faction of his own disciples who did everything possible to discredit the old maestro. The crusaders went to the extent of concocting scriptures to support their own stand. The early sixties were days of turmoil and hatred between the Guru and the said camp. The controversy became acrimonious. The Guru had to go even to the court against the rebels who fought with the help of some books which were ultimately proved concocted material. I attempted to bring a solution to the said dispute outside the court. Thanks to the magnanimity of the old maestro, the case was ultimately settled outside the court but the other camp lost its image in the cultural circles of Manipur and elsewhere.

Guru Amubi behaved like a father figure of the dance form after the unhappy incident and did not make any unkind reference to his rebels who continued to enjoy his affection as before. He had to face serious criticism from his own supporters and admirers for the tolerance he had shown to those who indulged in constant distortions of the image of not only the master whom they outwardly called their Guru but also that of the Manipuri classical form.

Guru Amubi was undoubtedly an outstanding figure among the Gurus who contributed significantly during the transition from the extremely orthodox fold to the contemporary environment. He and his contemporaries like Guru Atomba and Guru Amudon never thought it necessary to start individual *gharanas* for each Guru. They admitted that individual touch could not be concealed. It had been observed that those who failed to sweep away the orthodox tradition ably promoted by Guru Amubi switched over to propagating their own un-orthodox compositions in the name of the separate *gharanas*. The promoters of the Manipuri tradition do not hesitate to call a halt to this unhealthy trend of the *gharanas*. A guru of the stature of Amubi could be considered qualified to start a trend particularly in solo compositions which one might call his *gharana*. It would however be a mistake on the part of those who are still to settle in the tradition to embark upon establishing *gharanas*.

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