

# GURU AMUBI SINGH

## THE LAST TITAN

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Suryamukhi Devi

Guru Maisnam Amubi Singh was the most gifted of all the Manipuri dance gurus who gave a new orientation to the creative evolution of Manipuri style of dancing. His creative genius was combined with his faith in *bhakti*. To him dance was not a mere entertainment but a rare *sadhana*, a religious *yajna*. It was a way to realise God. He rediscovered the richness of its art with bold inventiveness. His new compositions and experiments had not only enriched the great artistic heritage of Manipur but also gave an impetus to the contemporary movement in Indian dance.

It was 1950. A new dance institution called 'Nrityashram' (now defunct) was established by the late Y. Mahavir Singh in our own premises under the able guidance of Guru Amubi Singh. It was during this period that I came in contact with many gurus of Manipur. I began my formal training under the guidance of Guruji. During this period of our long association I continued to learn many techniques under him. Soon the *Nrityashram* grew to be a popular institution and gave a new impetus to the movement of Manipuri dance by introducing novel approaches and bold techniques. Guruji contributed by composing some of the well-known dances for *Nrityashram*. Some of the better known of these dances are—*Mandila Cholom* (for women), *Nilakamala Dalashyam*, a dance depicting the glories of Sri Krishna, *Abir Khel*, a sequence from the *Basanta Rasa*.

When the Dance College (later on known as the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy) was established in the year 1954 under the auspices of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Guruji had to perform a stupendous task. As the Principal of this newly established College he had to carry heavy responsibilities. One of the main problems was to get the students for the College. At that time learning dance was considered to be a secondary thing. Only a few interested persons encouraged their children to learn dancing purely as a matter of hobby. Guruji personally did talent scouting for persons interested in dance and gathered their children as the

students of the college. Thus he spent 19 long years in a dedicated service for the promotion of Manipuri dance. He sacrificed everything and used all his energy in his noble mission to transmit the message of Manipuri dance.

Guru Amubi Singh was a gifted artiste and a superb dance composer. He was also a genuine believer in tradition. He always fought for the preservation of the purity of the royal *gharana*. But he was not an obscurantist. His outlook was modern and he had a critical awareness of the changing contemporary situation. Therefore his style and form clearly reflected a beautiful combination of the tradition and the modernity which made him a unique master of this art. For, he knew through his life-long devotion, the soul of Manipuri dance—its spiritual, religious and devotional ecstasy. The '*Rasa* dance' was his immortal composition which was specially condensed for modern stage presentation without losing the intrinsic quality and the overall flavour of the original 12 hour *mandapa* based dance-drama. Today, the *Rasa* dance has travelled throughout the world spreading the beauty and essence of Manipuri dance. Next followed his classic composition—the *Krishna Bandana* which was based on poet Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. Guruji gave me the chance to play the role of Krishna in the *Rasa* dance. I was a member of some of the cultural delegations sent outside India in the sixties. Guruji not only choreographed many famous dance-dramas but also left some valuable books, considered to be of a pioneering work on the various aspects of Manipuri dance and music.

Who is a real guru? It is not easy to answer the question.

To me, Guru Amubi Singh was a symbol of a great Guru in the true sense of the term. His sheer love for this art was boundless. He taught us with meticulous care and explained again and again the *rasa* and *bhava* of his composition until he was satisfied. He loved his pupils like his own daughters and sons. I never heard a single harsh word from him during the period of my association with him. He was, indeed, a man of wide sympathies, and he had a purity of spirit that made him a very distinguished guru of the modern times. I still remember one incident. Guruji was very old at that time. He could hardly stand up. But his spirit and zeal to teach never flagged. He said lovingly, "Dear children, I am dying. You try to learn from me as much as you can. When I am dead you cannot learn from my dead body. I want to leave to you all I know and all that I have learnt."

During the last years of his life he received an important assignment from the Sangeet Natak Akademi. It was his last major work. Guruji was requested to compose *Gita Govinda* in Manipuri style for the Gita Govinda Celebrations to be held at New Delhi from March 18 to 20, 1967. Guruji started his work in all earnest. He called some of his trusted disciples to his house. He opened Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* and read it before them

several times. He completed his composition within a very short duration inspite of his failing health. It was an exquisite composition for a limited number of six performers only consisting of four musicians and two artists. The composition was imbued with his mature and artistic sensibilities. Through select stanzas of the *ashtapadis* the entire story of the *Gita Govinda*, as Manipuri Vaishnavas understand and interpret it, was rendered, strictly after the tradition of Manipuri dance. He introduced some *abhinaya* in it. I was selected to play the role of Krishna in this dance-drama. It was an unforgettable experience for me.

Guru Amubi—my dear Guru—was the last Titan of this great tradition of Manipuri dance. We few who were fortunate enough to learn at the feet of the great guru remember him fondly. It is once in a century that a great guru like Guru Amubi Singh enriches Manipuri tradition.

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