

## GURU SHISHYA PARAMPARA

It still happens in good European families that a gifted child making a brilliant career in linguistics or science or banking leaves it all behind “to buy a ticket to India of spirit”, as phrased by Nicolai Gumilev, a Russian poet, philosopher and traveler of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Well, extremely pragmatic modern Indians live through this phenomenon, too. In this way a young doctor becomes a sanyasin(monk), and a royal family turns away from a prince daring to play classical music in public.

Tania Nazarova, my old time friend from Moscow, was a promising violinist and a serious geography scholar with a completed PhD. To the sheer horror of her family, this young lady got too much involved into some Indian dance with a lot of foot work accentuated by the sound of bells around the ankles, with dazzling spinning, though quite different from respectable ballet fouetes, and with weird face expressions and flowing hand movements. 15 years back Tania won an Indian government scholarship for learning this classical Indian dance named *kathak* and moved to Delhi.

Nazarova turned out to be a gifted, hard-working dancer, and she was accepted as a student by one of the most outstanding kathak teachers in the capital, Guru Shri Munna Shukla of the Lucknow gharana ( Word “*gharana*” derives from the root “ghar”- “house”, and means an artistic school established within one old family, passing a particular tradition and style from one generation to the other.)

Guru Shri Munna Shukla is a dancer of a rare lyrical grace, a most refined choreographer and a teacher of immense knowledge of live tradition and ancient texts, with a sharp pedagogical intuition. Moreover, he is reputed in Delhi as one of a few relict Gurus, leading an orderly, detached, yogic, in a true sense of the word, life. The personality of Munna Shukla reminds the public that classical dance and music in India have for centuries been a spiritual practice, not just a matter of aesthetics.

Anyhow, after 13 years of intensive training under such a guru, the Russian girl has evolved into a mature kathak dancer and teacher, living according to yoga values. 2 years ago Tania moved back to Moscow where she is active as a kathak performer and choreographer and yoga teacher. Though Tania’s story sounds like a modern fairy tale with an eccentric Oriental touch, and we may well need such fables to get encouraged to pursue our innermost dreams, the everyday reality of Nazarova’s Delhi life was quite far from being smooth and romantic.

The milieu of professional Indian classical musicians and dancers is highly competitive and almost inaccessible for outsiders. On top, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the image of a Russian dancing girl in the urban consciousness is that of a whore. So Tania had to cut her vital needs to a bare survival minimum and to earn her life through occasional contracts in folk dance and show business or serving as a guide and a Russian-English interpreter.

When I visited Tania in Delhi several years back, I was appalled by her living conditions and amazed by her lucid and happy state of mind. She just laughed at my bewilderment and brought me to the class of her Gurujee in Kathak Kendra.

The mere presence of a beautifully aged man with long limbs and white hair had a strange soothing effect on all the students and spectators. During the class he was saying the *paranth* (rhythmic syllables danced and played on tabla (drums), the language of kathak) or was observing his dancing students. And when Guru Shri Munna Shukla got up to show a “*meen*” movement, I was certainly not the only one to feel that creeping sensation along the spine.

My memories of the rest of that early March day in Delhi have a dreamlike quality of a Satyajit Ray’s movie. I was invited to the house of Munna Shukla in Vasanth Vihar where his two most prominent disciples, Kavita Thakur and Tania Nazarova, danced Meera Bai stories to the voice and harmonium of the master and to the tabla of his son, Anuradh Shukla.

I believe, I physically felt a high voltage tension between the Guru and his three *shishyas* (students) that somehow fully embraced and uplifted my unprepared soul. I realized that I was witnessing the GURU SHISHYA PARAMPARA (in Sanskrit “parampara” means a line leading beyond, an uninterrupted flow, sequence, tradition). So an Indian history textbook phrase that “the oldest in the world Vedic tradition has survived being passed from the father to the son, from the teacher to the students” turned out to be a tangible reality, unfolding itself before my eyes!

Well, even the best descriptions of intense spiritual and aesthetic experiences sound flat and banal, and an experiencer feels helpless struggling to cast a supreme joy memory into words. I perceive it as a part of the miracle that count de Pahlen was touched by my staggering report to the point of sponsoring the visit of Guru Shri Munna Shukla and his disciples to Geneva in September 2008.

The generous gesture of Serge de Pahlen was probably not that surprising for Munna Shukla, whose ancestor Durga Prasad was the guru of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Avadh in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and saw the blossoming of the Lucknow gharana under the enlightened royal patron. On the other hand, the Lvovs and de Pahlens, the princely ancestors of Serge, are known as art connoisseurs and benefactors in Russian history.

The Geneva audience will have a chance to appreciate an unparalleled grace (*nazakat* or *lasya*) of the Lucknow gharana. and to attend a **concert** of Guru Shri Munna Shukla and his disciples **on September 6 at the Salle Centrale de la Madeleine at 20.00. At 11.00** of the same day Gurujee will hold a **conference** cum demonstration on the place of kathak in the spiritual system of India. A number of kathak workshops and private classes will be organized during the first three weeks of September for the Indian dance amateurs, both advanced and beginners, who may try to let this beautiful ancient tradition flow through their minds and bodies.

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