

Shambhu Maharaj

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Maharaj Bindadeen, uncle of Shambhu Maharaj, and the revered patriarch of the Lucknow *gharana* was well-known for his *abhinaya*, so much so that his name has become synonymous with *abhinaya* in Kathak. He was short in stature and not strikingly handsome. But it is said that the gestures of his eyes and hands during the performance of his *abhinaya* created illusions that were incredible. There is a legend that when he performed in the Nathdwara temple, the entire congregation prostrated itself before him. When Maharaj Bindadeen appeared before them in the posture of Krishna holding the flute, they saw him as a vision of the Lord Himself. Such was the spell of his *abhinaya*.

The most spontaneous and handsome tribute to this great dancer comes from none other than the distinguished philosopher of art, Ananda Coomaraswamy. In his *Notes on Indian Dramatic Technique*, published in 1914, he writes,

"I have never seen, nor do I hope to see," better acting than I saw once in Lucknow, when an old man a poet and dancer and a teacher of many, many dancing girls sang a Herd-Girl's 'complaint to the mother of Krishna'. This famous dancer whose name is Binda Deen, is a devout Brahman Thus, before an audience of pupils and neighbours, this old man sat on the ground and sang his poem. Picking up a scarf, he used it as a veil and no one could have remembered that he was anything but a shy and graceful young girl, telling a story with every sort of dramatic gesture of the hand and eyes. She told how Krishna had stolen the butter and the curds, what pranks he played, of his love-making and every sort of naughtiness. Every feature of the face, every movement of the body and hands was intentional, controlled, hieratic; not all his own devotion to Krishna spoiled his art to the least degree."

One had only to watch the performance of Shambhu Maharaj, the nephew of the great maestro Maharaj Bindadeen to experience the truth of what Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote, what he sought to communicate when he described the exquisite *abhinaya* of Maharaj Bindadeen. The older generation of Lucknow, who were closely associated with Maharaj Bindadeen and had seen him perform on a number of occasions, maintained that Shambhu Maharaj had inherited the great mimetic powers of his uncle. They also said that he could lend to his *abhinaya*, the same aesthetic grandeur and artistic excellence that his uncle did.

Maharaj Bindadeen died when Shambhu Maharaj was a mere child of eight and so he could not impart his art directly to his nephew. Shambhu

Maharaj was, therefore, entirely trained by his illustrious elder brother Achchan Maharaj, whom he held in the highest esteem. Later Shambhu Maharaj was able to carve a distinctive style of his own which was more in tune with his own dynamic personality. His style bore the stamp of his own genius. He excelled in *abhinaya* and even his guru paid a tribute to him for his achievement in this sphere.

Shambhu Maharaj was tall and handsome. He had a sinewy figure and chiselled features. A broad forehead, well-marked eyebrows, large and eloquent eyes and sensuous lips were ideal assets and he used them to advantage in his *abhinaya*. It was his practice to begin his *abhinaya* performance with a recital of the text of the composition; then he went on to do the *abhinaya*. His was a well-trained voice, rich and melodious. He modulated it to suit the purport of the words and with such a charming effect that he could immediately establish a rapport with his audience and communicate to his listeners the basic mood of the song. The *abhinaya* proper began with the varied and suggestive use of his eloquent eyes and mobile face. This he called *nain bhava*. The term is perhaps not a strictly academic one but the effect it created on the audience was really amazing. The illustration of the nine *rasas* with just the use of the eyes is not new to *abhinaya*. I have witnessed artists in other styles perform it with rare skill. A slight digression will illustrate the power that lies latent in the eyes. There is that beautiful *shloka* of Adi Shankaracharya in *Soundarya-Lahari*, describing the *Rasa Drishti*.

शिवे शृङ्गाराद्रौ तदितरमुखे कुत्सनपरा
सरोषा गङ्गायां गिरिशचरिते विस्मयवती ।
हराहिभ्यो भीता सरसिरुह सोभाग्यजयिनी
सखीषु स्मेरा ते मयि जननि दृष्टिः सकरुणा ॥

"Oh Mother! Thy gaze is soft with *love* towards Shiva; full of *disgust* towards other people; *furious* towards Ganga; expressive of *wonder* at Girisha's life career; full of *dread* (when confronted) with the snakes (ornaments) of Hara; *victorious* over the beautiful colour of the lotus; *smiles* on thy *sakhis*; and is full of *compassion* towards me."

The nine *rasas*, *Shringara*, *Bibhatsa*, *Raudra*, *Adbhuta*, *Bhayanaka*, *Veera*, *Hasya*, and *Karuna* are described as they express themselves in the Mother's gaze.

Shambhu Maharaj's *nain bhava* was followed by a further elaboration of the *bhavas*, with the use of hand gestures which he called *kara bhava*. Though he employed a large number of those prescribed in the ancient texts, he did not make a fetish of terminology. But one had no doubt that he used all the Head Gestures, Eye Gestures, Eyebrow Gestures, Neck Gestures, almost all the One-hand Gestures and a large number of the Combined-hand Gestures of the texts.

When a critic questioned him about his apathy towards the terms of the *mudras*, he said:

जब मैं किसी ठुमरी या भजन का भाव बताता हूँ
तब उसमें जो रस और भाव हैं उनको मैं आप
तक पहुँचाने की कोशिश करता हूँ। अगर
इसमें मैं कामयाब रहा तो मुझे मुद्राओं के
नामों से कोई वास्ता नहीं। जो हस्तक या मुद्राएँ
उस वक्त बने जाती हैं उनको हम "उपजते
अङ्ग-स्वभाव या स्वाभाविक कहते हैं।

"When I do the *abhinaya* for any *thumri* or *bhajan*, my aim is to convey to you the *rasa* and the *bhavas* of the composition. Once I succeed in doing this, I feel I have nothing to do with the names of the *mudras*. I term the gestures which are used by me spontaneous and natural."

To him the execution of *abhinaya* was more important than the knowledge of the names of the *mudras* he had used, because he believed in the *total* impact of his interpretation on his audience. He considered this the quintessence of the art of *abhinaya*. But he was not against the terms and teaching their proper meaning and use to the new generation of pupils. "You must certainly teach the names of the *mudras* to your pupils because it is a good thing to possess such knowledge", he said to me once and then added humorously, "If now, at this stage, I think of learning the names, I think I will forget my *abhinaya* just as the centipede forgot how to crawl in trying to count the number of its feet."

It is well-nigh impossible to put on paper the subtle nuances of his *nain bhava* and to describe in detail his *abhinaya*. But we can catch a glimpse of its salient features, using as a concrete example his favourite *thumri—Koun gali gayo Shyam*.

कौन गलिन गयो श्याम, बता दे गुंया।
गोकुल दुंदी वृंदावन दुंदी मथुरा में हो गयी शाम॥

"Tell me, my friend, which path (*gali*) my Shyam took. I have searched (for him) in Gokul and I have searched (for him) in Vrindavan (and now) at Mathura it is evening (getting dark)."

This is how he began his *abhinaya*:

One. *Koun*—raising the left eye-brow; *gali*—tracing an imaginary path-way with the eyes from over the right shoulder to the far corner of the hall; *gayo*—raising the body and the head a little and looking far away in that direction; *Shyam*—a slight movement of the neck (*sundari greeva*).

Two. *Koun*—raising the right eye-brow, simultaneously tilting the head very slightly; *gali*—tracing a path as before but from the left to the right corner of the hall; *gayo*—raising the body and the head and craning the neck to look into the distance in a searching movement; *Shyam*—the same neck movement with a slight frown to show disappointment.

Three. *Koun*—raising both the eye-brows with a slight upward jerk of the head; *gali*—tracing with the eyes a winding path from the near front to



"Koun gali gayo Shyam?"



"Is he attached to some 'gali' like the 'kajal' to the eye?"



Shyam holding the flute.

the far end of the hall; *gayo*—raising the body slightly supported by the right hand and looking far ahead with a searching expression and a slight frown, *Shyam*—drooping eye-lids and a slow tilting down of the head to express utter disappointment.

Words fail to describe the finer shades of the *nain bhava*. One had glimpses of the subtle nuances of anxiety, disappointment, impatience, touching pathos, abject helplessness and anger at the *sakhi's* reluctance to divulge the secret of his movements.

After the *nain bhava* which never failed to send the audience into raptures, he proceeded with the *kara bhava*, which I will describe by trying to identify the *mudras* he used. It goes without saying that all the hand gestures were in harmony with the emotions expressed on the face.

One. *Koun*—*alapadma* with the right hand; *gali*—*soochi hasta* with the same right hand pointing to the imagined *gali*; *gayo Shyam*—a searching look and placing both hands in the *ardhachandra mudra* close to each other over the head to denote the crown (*mukut*).

Two. *Koun*—both the hands in *pataka*, stretched out slightly in the direction of the *sakhi*; *gali*—describing a winding path in front with both hands in the *pataka mudra*, and the hands facing each other; *gayo Shyam*—looking straight ahead with one hand in *arala* above the head, facing outwards and the other near the lips to suggest the flute.

Three. A further elaboration of the theme was suggested thus: The *sakhi* was questioned. The hands pointed in various directions to say:

"Is this the *gali*?" "No!!"

"Then it may be this one?" "No!!"

"Sure enough it must be this?" "No!!"



"Koun gali?" (addressing the 'sakhi').



"I have searched (for him) in Gokul and Vrindaban. I am tired."

To show the exasperation of the questioner he lightly tapped the back of his right hand on the palm of his left or on the right thigh as if to say,

"Oh! How can I ever find Him if you keep on deceiving me thus?"

All these gestures he used to combine with the line *bata do gunya*, cajoling the friend, beseeching her with folded hands, touching her feet humbly and then showing her own annoyance because the friend has turned a deaf ear to all her entreaties.

The next step was to emphasise the various ways of searching for Him.

- (i) Parting the low branches of a tree to get a better view (*pataka* hands both turned outwards).
- (ii) Removing an object which obstructed the view—a vertical *pataka* turned outwards and moved away from the line of vision by the other hand with *sarpashirsha mudra*.
- (iii) Looking over a hedge or a small parapet—placing both *pataka hastas* one hand exactly over the other with the tips of the middle finger of one hand touching the wrist of the other hand and kept parallel to the ground just below the line of vision. Slowly raising the head as if looking over it.
- (iv) Holding the branches of a tree on the right with both hands—the right hand in the *mushti mudra* turned outwards, and raised above the head and the left also in a similar *mudra* held a little below, near about the right shoulder, searching intently from the left to the right. Then followed a detailed description of Shyam.
 - (a) Shyam with his long curly hair—both hands in the *soochi hasta*, slowly moving down the temples to the shoulders, the stretched finger making revolving movements.
 - (b) Who wears the *mukut*—with the *ardhachandra* hands as described earlier.

- (c) Dark as the cloud—both *pataka* hands, palms down held high above the head, describing the movement of the cloud.
- (d) Who wears the *Vaijayanti Mala*—showing the spot where the garland is and with the right hand in *mrigashirsha mudra*.
- (e) Who wears armlets—placing the armlets in their proper places and tightening them. The string is held in the teeth and the bead provided is moved towards the arm with the *hamsasya hasta*.
- (f) Who wears wristlets—the wristlets are fastened by tightening the clasps provided with the *hamsasya hasta*.
- (g) Who wears the *peetambara*—describe the tying of the *peetambara*.
- (h) And finally, Shyam, who plays on the flute—both hands near the lips (to the right) in *arala mudra*.

Then Shambhu Maharaj went on to describe *sanchari bhavas*. This was his forte. He had such a deep perception and such imaginative gifts that their depiction was really exquisite.

- (i) "Has his beautiful form reached another heart through (the *gali* of) the eyes?" Both the hands with *hamsasya mudra* pointing downwards, moving down from the front of the eyes towards the heart.
- (ii) "Has he captivated somebody's heart like sweet perfume?" Applying the perfume on the back of the hand and inhaling it.
- (iii) "Has he entered another heart as the melody of his flute through the ears?"
- (iv) "Has he become as attached to another *gali* as the *sindur* is to the parting of the hair?"
- (v) "Has he become attached to a *gali* like the *kajal* or *surma* to the eye?"

Sanchari bhavas were then enacted by comparing the wearing of the various ornaments of the ear, nose, bangles on the wrists and the finger-rings on the fingers to the entering and adorning a *gali* by Shyam. Shambhu Maharaj continued to unfold the *bhavas*, making each one more appealing than the previous one. The crowning *bhava* was expressed thus: the death of a person, the laying of the body on the funeral pyre, the breaking of the bangles, the removing of all ornaments and washing off the *sindur* by his wife to suggest widowhood, the lighting of the pyre, the sorrowing women following with her eyes the patterns of the *galis* made by the smoke and asking the same question *koun gali gayo Shyam*. Shambhu Maharaj executed this particular *bhava* with such rare skill that it invariably brought tears to the eyes of the audience and even Shambhu Maharaj himself seemed visibly moved.

He did not dwell at length on the last two lines of the song. Gokul was shown by the milking of the cows and the churning of the curds while *dhoondi* was shown by gestures suggesting a frantic search. Vrindavana was depicted by maidens walking down the *ghats* of the Jamuna for water. Mathura

was identified with the ruling Kamsa by a gesture suggesting his moustaches and an arrogant look. *Ho gayi sham*—the rising of the sun, tracing its path through the sky with the eyes or the hand and ending with the sunset shown by closing of the eyes, lighting an oil lamp and setting out to search for the foot-prints of Shyam.

Thus ended the magnificent performance. One marvelled at the depth of his conception and the picturesque elegance with which he demonstrated the *bhavas*. The lingering warmth seemed to cling to you for days on end.

Another favourite of his was *Madho kahi na jat dukh Brijake* which described the plight of the hapless *gopis* of Braj when Lord Krishna left them and stayed at Mathura. Uddhava was sent by Krishna to Braj to pacify the *gopis* and teach them the philosophy of Brahman. Uddhava returned to Mathura, converted to the philosophy of love. In this song he narrates the pangs of separation experienced by the *gopis* and other beings in Braj. I still recall that evening in Lucknow when Shambhu Maharaj sang those lines. On this particular occasion his *abhinaya* reached such heights that not a single individual in the audience could hold back his tears. The great maestro himself was so visibly moved that he had to bring the performance to an abrupt stop.

In his younger days he preferred to render these songs: *Kisne chilman se mara nazara mujhe; Tan-e-mareez me dam ka shumar baki hai; Chale aiho Kanha Jamuna kinare mero gaon; Nikas chalbe tum ko laike sanwariya* and present their meaning through his *abhinaya*. These songs used to be considered as commonplace verses by many performers. But the genius of Shambhu Maharaj and his artistic brilliance lent them a refined meaning and a new dignity. Once a connoisseur chided him for choosing such songs. Shambhu Maharaj was hurt by such criticism. He considered it a challenge and with the superb *abhinaya* accompanying *Chale aiho Kanha Jamuna kinare mero gaon* he won the acclaim of the accuser.

Shambhu Maharaj was a master of *abhinaya*. But he was also an adept in the *nritya* aspect of the Kathak style of dance. His execution of the various *bols* such as the *amad*, *paran* and *paramelu* bore the stamp of his distinctive style and individuality. He had improvised *hastakas* for the traditional *bols* and they were both picturesque and graceful. He always tried to avoid speed in performance and laid greater stress on precision in the co-ordinated movements of the body, arms, hands, head and eyes, accompanied, of course, with the correct timing of the foot-work. All his compositions had a lyrical form and extraordinary grace. Every movement had the right accent which highlighted the particular syllable of the *bol* and the combination of all movements helped to emphasise the beauty of the complete *bol*.

He visualised the *bol* as a personality and then conceived appropriate *hastakas* to suit its character. Thus, for the *parans* which are composed of heavy and forceful *pakhawaj* syllables, he always employed vigorous movements and for some of the soft sounding *natawari bols* he used exceedingly light and fragile movements which matched their temper.

When he introduced these innovations, he always sought the sanction of his eldest brother, Guru Achchan Maharaj who, in turn, invariably showed his approval by a word of praise and appreciation.

Here are some of the *bol/s* which he himself danced, adding to them a personal touch. He also taught them to his pupils.

Amad:

Amad is a Persian word which means advent or coming. This piece consists of a set pattern of *natawari* syllables preceded by a traditionally accepted *pakhawaj paran*. The following *amad* was a special favourite of Shambhu Maharaj. He provided extremely graceful movements with enough scope to cover a large area of the stage.

धा त क्का थुं | गा s धा गे | दिं गे ता s | धा दिं ता s |
 धे ता किट धा | तू क्का थुं गा | तुकि टल का s | तिड क्का गदिगुन |
 ता थेई तत् थेई | आ थेई तत् थेई | थेई ताथेई s ता थेई | थेई थेई तत् तत् |
 ता
 x

Here is another *amad* in which he deviated a little from the convention that every syllable of the *bol* must be produced by the feet. He gave this conventional *amad* lines as well as postures which were very refreshing.

तत् तत् ता तुक | दूण दूण झिटकिट | थो थुडं s ग तुक | थुं तुक दधिगुण |
 थेई s s तक | थुं तुक दधिगुण | थेई s s तक | थुं तुक दधिगुण |
 ताथेई तत् थेई | आथेई तत् थेई | थेई ताथेई s ताथेई | थेई s s तत् |
 ता
 x

Paramelu:

Paramelu is a piece in which syllables, seemingly of various percussion instruments, are combined with the *natawari bols*. Some of conventional syllables used are—*daga daga*, *thudanga*, *dhetam*, *thoonga-noonga*, *dhilanga*, *jhan-jhan*, etc.

धे ता s म धे | ता s म दग दग | थुं तुक थो s | धे ता s म धे |
 ता s म दग दग | थुं तुक थो s | तुकिट धि किट तुक | थुं तुक दधिगुन |
 थुं s गुनं s ग तुक | थुं s तुक दधिगुन | थेई s s तुक | थुं s गुनं s ग तुक |
 थुं तुक दधिगुन | थेई s s तुक | थुं s गुनं s ग तुक | थुं तुक दधिगुन | ता
 x

Natawari:

Natawara is an epithet used to describe Lord Krishna. The word means "the best among the dancers". It stems from a legend: when Krishna subdued the monster-serpent Kaliya and danced on his hoods, the syllables *ta*, *theyi*, and *tat* were produced. Hence all the *bol/s* composed of these syllables and their derivatives, *digdig*, *tigdha*, *tram*, are classed as *natawari*.



Maharaj Bindadeen

दिगदिगदिगदिगयेई॥ तायेई॥ तायेई॥ येई॥ ॥ ॥ लत् थो ॥ दिगदिगदिगदिगयेई॥
 तायेई॥ तायेई॥ येई॥ ॥ ॥ लत् थो ॥ तिगधाधातिगधाधादिगदिग॥ तिगधाधातिगधाधा थो॥
 तिगधाधातिगधाधादिगदिग॥ तिगधाधा तिगधाधादिगदिग॥ तायेई॥ तायेई॥ तायेई॥ ॥ ॥ येई॥ तायेई॥ तिगधाधा॥
 ता

Paran:

Pieces composed exclusively of the *pakhawaj* syllables are termed, *parans*. This *paran* was a great favourite of Shambhu Maharaj.

कि॒ट॒ ल॒क॒ शुं॒ शुं॒ । ना॒ ति॒ ट॒ ता॒ । ऽ॒ धा॒ दिं॒ ता॒ । कि॒ट॒ धा॒ दिं॒ ता॒ ।
 क॒ ति॒ ट॒ धा॒ । दिं॒ ता॒ क॒त् ऽ॒ । ति॒ ट॒ धा॒ दिं॒ । ता॒ ऽ॒ कि॒ड॒धे॒त् ।
 ऽ॒ धा॒ दिं॒ ता॒ । क॒ ति॒ ट॒ धा॒ । ऽ॒ शुं॒ ऽ॒ त॒ । धा॒ ऽ॒ क॒ ति॒ ।
 ट॒ धा॒ ऽ॒ शुं॒ । ऽ॒ त॒ धा॒ ऽ॒ । क॒ ति॒ ट॒ धा॒ । ऽ॒ शुं॒ ऽ॒ त॒ । धा॒

I was associated with him for thirty years, starting from 1939. I had the good fortune of witnessing many of his innumerable performances. I revered him as my guru and he had a great affection for me as his pupil.

As a person, he was very impulsive and believed in intense and moment-to-moment living. There was a commanding, an almost arrogant note in his form of speech. This was in contrast to the other side of his nature which was gentle and loving. His mother and his eldest brother were often hurt by his overbearing manner and prodigal ways.

I will always remember the last performance at Lucknow in 1969 when he performed in my house. He was ailing and looked very weak and tired. But he agreed to dance because his friends pressed him to do so. He started with the song *Jamuna kinare aj Shyam ne sakhiyon ki chunariyan chcheen layin*. We heard it for the first time then. His voice sounded feeble and his gestures lacked their usual force but the interpretation carried the same spontaneity and dignity. His *sanchari bhavas* were full of the same charm. We did not dream then that this would be his last performance.

Abhinaya had become almost second nature with him. Even on his death-bed, just a few minutes before he breathed his last, he was heard instructing his nephew Birju Maharaj how to render the *Bahut door ho pas ao to janu*, (You are too far away; come closer to me and I will recognise you). The line can be interpreted in a myriad ways but it seemed as though he was addressing Death itself. Within a few seconds he slumped on the pillow across his lap. His beautiful eyes remained open. Perhaps even Death was so fascinated by their appeal that it did not have the heart to close them.