

An Achiever Alumnus son Recalls The alumnus bangle – seller who won the Fair Maiden’s Heart !

Sumitra Charat Ram and the energy of dance and music

On her centenary, recalling the life of **Sumitra Charat Ram**, to whom Delhi owes much for its culture of classical dance, drama and music

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Sumitra Charat Ram is seen here with legendary sitar virtuoso, Ravi Shankar

In 1934, **Lala Shriram** of Delhi Cloth Mills, later to become famous as DCM, sent two of his sons, Bharat Ram and Charat Ram, to the Nainital house of the highly regarded zamindar, Raja Jwala Prasad. They were to consider his daughter, Sumitra, as a bride for the elder Bharat Ram. But it so transpired that it was Prasad’s youngest child, 20 years then, and **Charat Ram**, four years her junior, who fell deeply in love. In their conservative society, the elders, inevitably, banned the relationship, proscribed their meetings and then forcibly married off Sumitra to be “rid of the problem”. In **true Jasma-Odan tradition**, however, Sumitra threatened suicide. She continued her trysts with Charat Ram, who sometimes came disguised as a chudiwala (bangle-seller). After much turmoil and anguish and weeping and wailing on all sides, the elders relented and Sumitra’s marriage was annulled, with **the legal, spiritual and moral sanctity of no less than Mohandas Gandhi**.

The thwarted Lala Shriram was cool to the new bride. He exiled his son and his bride to Calcutta to work in his first venture capital investment, **Jay Engineering**, now **Usha International**. He, however, softened the exile by lodging them in a suite at the Grand

Hotel for Rs 250 per month, including five meals. Charat Ram countered the negative vibes from Delhi through diligence in work, tidy management and by occasional threats of going off on his own. On their return from Kolkata, all was forgiven and Sumitra quickly produced four children in just four years. By now the aroma of freedom and the impending partition of the country involved the family because DCM had factories in Pakistan.



Sumitra Charat Ram

17 November 1914 – 8 August 2011

Charat Ram was always working and could not distinguish between home and office and had little time for the arts. Sumitra was an excellent hostess and her warm and beautiful smile made guests, including at company parties, feel very welcome. The company officers and wives loved the food and functions at her house.

Aside from writers, politicians and philosophers, Lala Shriram's house was also home to the great dancer **Uday Shankar**, the French diva Madame Simkie, the great classical musicians Ustad **Allauddin Khan** and Pandit **Ravi Shankar**, among others. This relationship with dancers and musicians led Sumitra to tentatively put her toe into initiating a much-needed institution for propagation and teaching of Indian classical music and dance and for presenting mythological dance dramas. In this she was **greatly encouraged by Lala Shriram**, who by then doted on her, and the Shriram Bhartiya Kala Kendra (SBKK) started in the huge taikhana (literally, **treasure room**) at **18 Curzon Road** where the **Hindustan Times** Building now stands. The dance drama Ram Leela, now in its 57th fabulous year, had scores written by the famous Hindi poet "**Rahi**", and **Ramdhari Singh Dinkar**, then poet laureate of India.

As growth came, some government support also followed and **SBKK** shifted from Curzon Road to the barrack-like dwellings on **Rouse Avenue** and thence, by happenstance, to the wonderful current central setting on **Copernicus Marg** with **Kamani** Auditorium as its adjunct. Sadly for Sumitra, one of her dearest wishes never came to pass — that of her progeny achieving proficiency in any of the performing arts.

Sumitra harnessed the cultural resources of all of "Old" Delhi in developing SBKK. **Maheshwar Dayal**, Naina Devi, **Begum Qudsia Zaidi**, **Begum of Bhopal**, **Nirmala Joshi**, **Humayun Kabir** and many others were great enablers and these family relationships still maintain. She received patronage from prime ministers and presidents and, in turn, was responsible for the creation of 43 mythological dance dramas of exquisite design and artistry. The original ustad of Kathak, **Guru Shambhu Maharaj**, was instrumental in teaching and training and created great dancers like **Maya Rao**, Kumudini Lakhia and Uma Sharma. He was succeeded by his nephew, **Birju Maharaj**.

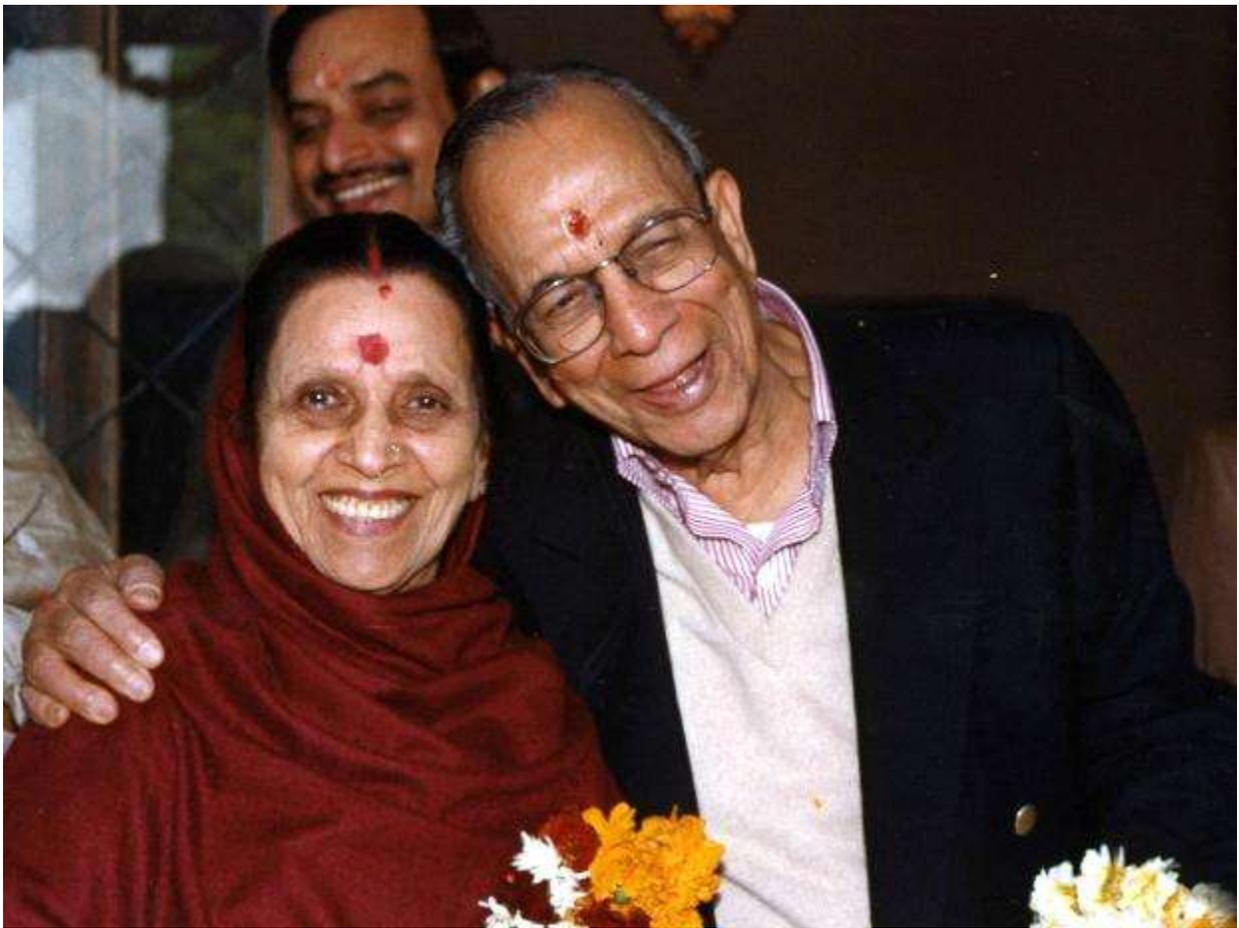


*With friends and family. To her right is her **daughter Shobha Deepak Singh** who is carrying her legacy forward*

Additionally, SBKK hosted the **Shri Ram Shankar Lal annual music festival**, in which the entire galaxy of Indian classical musicians have performed at one time or another and, in many cases, earned their spurs. Many artists regarded her as “mother”; some referred to her as “Chanddi” (mother goddess Durga, who was often angry). Sumitra brought to life her **Gangetic belt culture** and lore of festivals, marriages, songs, dance and community, as agricultural people are wont to do, at [18-22 Curzon Road](#).

Business flourished, SBKK flourished, but life’s dark clouds laden with internecine family troubles floated across the sun in only a few years after Lala Shriram’s demise in 1963. The families of the three **sons, Murali Dhar, Bharat Ram and Charat Ram**, squared off against one another, sometimes together and sometimes separate, with the wives dutifully backing their husbands. Simultaneously, poor financial management of the family holding company allowed expatriate industrialist Swraj Paul to launch a takeover attempt of DCM and later, family member **Vinay Rai to launch a takeover of Usha**.

Through all this “dharma yudh”, as some called it, Sumitra discovered that Charat Ram’s affections for her had now shifted to **a Japanese lady**. Sometimes she fell ill bearing this burden, but every time her fighting spirit would enable her to rise above it all, particularly after the family had settled the division of the business among themselves. Whenever Charat Ram travelled to Japan, Sumitra would repair to the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry for solace.

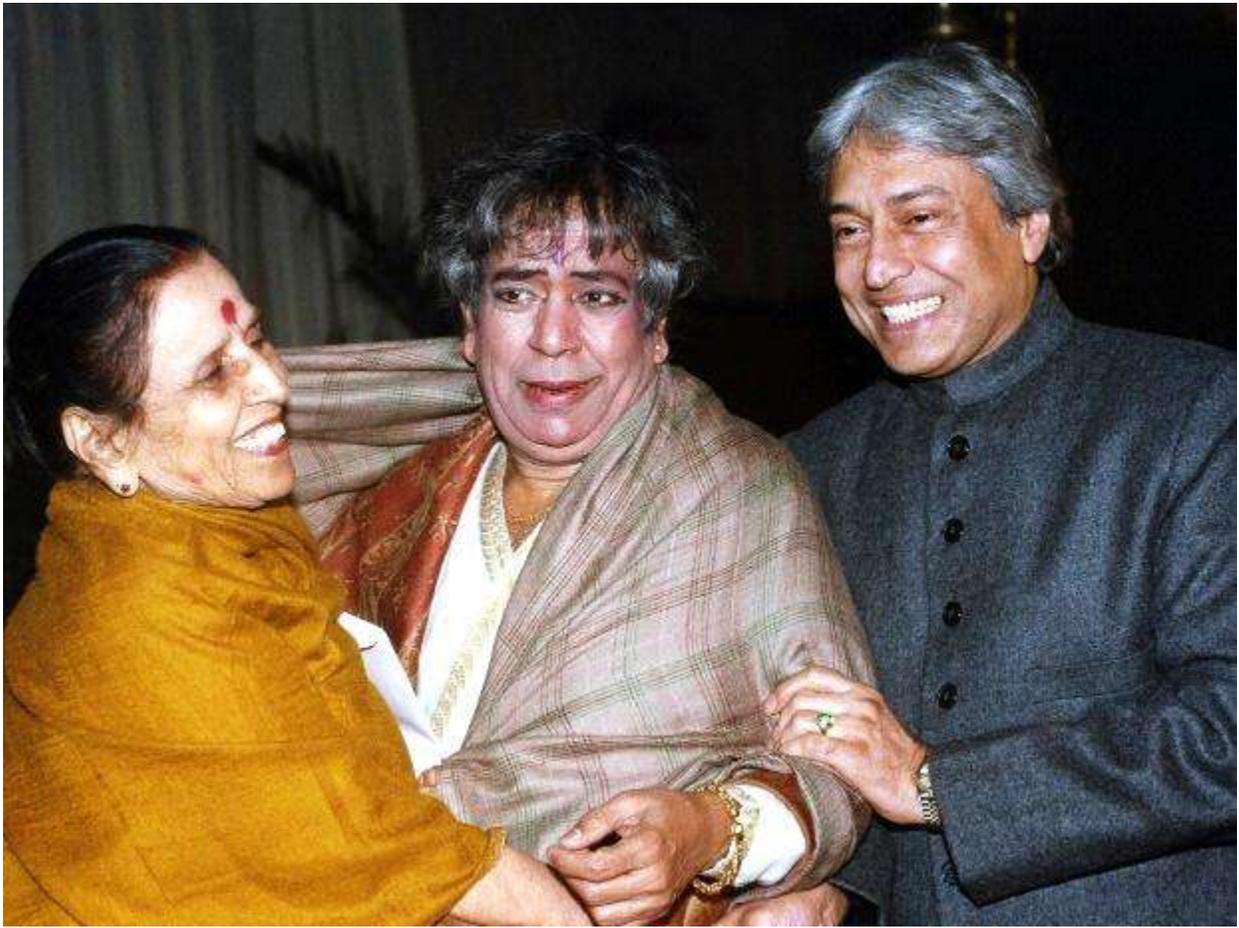


With her husband, Lala Charat Ram

This alienation of affection caused her to pursue a biographical treatise that she titled **Pratham Purush (First Man)**. In the book, she variously described her devotion to God and divinity, and, most importantly, to **her husband, her true Lord**, as he was the first, last and only man in her life. Despite all the indiscretions against her, she never forgot to touch her husband's feet every day until, at the age of 87, the strain of straightening up from the ground caused her thigh bone to crack, compelling her to finally desist from the practice. Despite Charat Ram never crediting or respecting her for her great intellect and integrity, she absorbed his snubs and continued to be fully devoted to him.

When Charat Ram started ailing, it was painful for her. She swallowed her considerable pride and **invited his Japanese mistress to be with him during his last days**, though the lady demurred. Bereft now of Pratham Purush, bereft of all her **siblings** (except Sushila, who lived to reach 102), bereft of her friends most of whom had passed away, her achievements just a memory, it was **just old age** that was her constant companion. She still reigned supreme in her home though, filled it with **warmth** for her family, and received all visitors with considerable **grace**.

She was exercised by the need for equitable distribution among her financially unequal progeny and grandchildren. In the end, the distribution of assets and liabilities by Charat Ram and Sumitra in their **wills not only created zero rancour** among their successors but actually created **greater harmony**.



Sumitra Charat Ram with Birju Maharaj and Amjad Ali Khan

Families come and go, but it is possible that institutions will survive for somewhat longer. SBKK is her creation and in honour of this very considerable contribution to society, the **Sumitra Charat Ram Annual Award** for excellence in Indian classical Music and Dance was instituted in 2011. The first awardee was Pandit Birju Maharaj for Kathak. In 2012 it went to Kishori Amonkar for Khayal and semi-classical forms of Hindustani music, to Kumudini Lakhia in 2013 for Kathak, and this year to Pandit Jasraj, the 84-year-old singer from the Mewati gharana.

On her centenary, we need to remember Sumitra with music and dance, not with sorrow, for at her remembrance meeting (chautha), her soul wafted heavenwards on the wings of a divine rendering of the Gayatri Mantra and the exposition in dance of the Gita by her other children, the students of SBKK.

For more on the eminent Sir Shri Ram Family [click here](#)