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Much of  
goodness  
consists in  
wanting to  
be good.

– Seneca

# HIS COAT OF MANY COLOURS

# L. SOMI ROY

It's as simple as that- wanting to be good-a good human being with good intentions and purpose. *Jaipur Polo* sat down for a tête-à-tête with Manipur's ambassador of culture & goodwill, the Manipuri ponies & international polo promoter, author, translator, film & media curator  
– L. Somi Roy.

**S**omi is the Founder and Managing Trustee of Imasi-The Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi Foundation at Imphal. His mother, MK Binodini Devi was a writer and poet, winner of India's civilian award-Padma Shri. Born to the last monarch of Manipur Sir Maharaj Churachand Singh, KCSI, CBE, and his queen Maharani Dhanamanjuri Devi, she played a pivotal role in her son Somi's life in many ways but especially in instilling in him a sense of community and custodianship. When *Jaipur Polo* met with Somi, he was elated that the Assam Rifles had created the world's first armed forces women's Polo team – the result of two years of work during the Pandemic. On its way to fruition as is also his Kumbi Village Rural Polo Project.

*“Just so you know, I don't play polo, but I have the highest regard for the game- thanks to the fact that I was born in the State which is the birthplace of Polo in India. I married this admiration for the sport with my concern for the well being of the Manipuri Pony, an endangered species. And since then, there has been no looking back.*”

*“I have been working with the United States Polo Association (USPA) to bring polo teams from the USA since 2013. This has led to Huntre! Equine's Polo Yatra, the first international women's polo tour of India.”*

One writer describes him as a custodian of culture. Soft spoken,

gentlemanly, and 'gently' handsome, Roy speaks passionately about how he forayed into the being the knight in shining armour for the Manipuri Pony, and Women's Polo in Manipur.

*“After I left for my film career in the USA in the early '80s, construction and development drives began to destroy the wetlands habitat of the ponies. And as a consequence, they were driven into the city. When I paid a visit after close to two decades- the ponies were on the streets of Imphal.*”

*“It is then that I realised that no one would care for the pony for the pony's sake. It was an environmental issue and a conservation matter, much like any other. Good to drum up in crises, but otherwise shoved under. I decided to brand this a 'cultural outrage'.”*

Just to give our readers a background, the Manipuri Pony is believed to have descended from a mythical winged horse called Samadon Ayangba in religious texts of Manipur. It is revered as the fastest beast, hailed to be Pegasus-like, with four sets of wings and spikes on its legs. Therefore, to see it foraging in the rubbish for sustenance, is a cultural outrage! Mapal Kangjeibung, the oldest extant polo ground in the World, and Manipur's Polo Association, became the centres of focus for Somi. He was able to involve the USPA working with his friend and polo partner Edward

Armstrong-the rest is history! In 2022, Somi was able to garner support for the women polo players of Manipur.

*“We cannot expect our women to play as well as keep the hearth; unless the State Government is able to make provisions for a sustainable livelihood, we will lose women players!”*

And after establishing a link between Jaipur and Imphal by bringing the USPA team to play during the Sawai Man Singh Cup in 2016, with patience, and persistence- the Man with the Coat of Many Colours helped the Sentinels of the North East – the mighty Assam Rifles, to make provisions for women polo players in their esteemed Forces. Now these ladies aren't just playing polo, they're also soldiering in India's Northeastern states! Donning the Uniform has added to their respect and elevated their economic status as well!

*Jaipur Polo* wishes Somi all the best and hopes trips to Jaipur for the Polo Season are on the cards when he and Edward expand their Polo Yatra international polo tour to bring the message of women's polo to the rest of the country!