

*September 14, 2003*

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## **A 9/11 story: Jupiter outshines Mars**

**J**upiter Yambem rarely came to work in the mornings. As banquet manager at the Windows of the World restaurant atop the World Trade Center, he was more of an evening bird. But on that fateful day, now consecrated in history as 9/11, he turned up very early to supervise corporate breakfast for a business delegation. At 8.46 a.m., the first of the hijacked jetliners slammed into the North Tower.

Over the next hour, as the news broke over television, Jupiter's wife Nancy and his long time friends Somi Roy and Christel Stevens tried frantically to reach him on his cell phone. They hoped he somehow hadn't made it to work. They kept hoping even when the building collapsed. They hoped in vain. It was almost a miracle that the authorities even found his body amid the debris days later.

Jupiter came from the eastern Indian state of Manipur, not exactly the fount of Indian immigration to the United States. In fact, what tied Jupiter, Nancy, Somi and Christel was their Manipuri connection. Christel, an American who was married to a Manipuri dance teacher and became a Manipuri exponent herself, first met Jupiter when she went to the far eastern Indian state in the early 1980s. Jupiter came to the US soon after to study, and met Somi, who is also from Manipur.

When Jupiter first proposed forming the North America Manipuri Association (NAMA) a few years later, there were all of six Manipuri families in the US, jokes Christel (There are about 200 today). But he persisted, wanting his kinsfolk not to forget their roots. Over the years the small group kept in touch and their bonds became stronger, especially after Christel split from her Manipuri husband in India and returned to the US., while Jupiter married an American from Beakon, New York.

They were a tiny Manipuri 'mafia' in an Indian diaspora dominated by Punjabis, South Indians, Gujaratis, Bengalis and other big ethnic and linguistic groups.

They held a memorial for Jupiter a week later on September 18, a few weeks shy of what would have been his and Nancy's tenth wedding anniversary. His family came over from Manipur. Jupiter had been involved in conservation movement to clean up the Hudson River, so some of his ashes were scattered in the Hudson. The singer Pete Seeger, who had become a good friend because of the Hudson connection, sang at the memorial. Jupiter's son Shanti, just a toddler then, let small candle carrying paper boats into the river. The family took rest of the ashes to India to scatter them over Jupiter's beloved eastern hills.

In Manipur, Jupiter's life was memorialized in a traditional theatre style called Shumang Leela, a sort of courtyard play staged by a traveling band of actors with music, song and dance. It is a fitting tribute. In his nearly two decades in the US, Jupiter wore Manipur on his heart and sleeve. At NAMA meetings, he would bring fish and cook it Manipuri style, he would organize traditional dances and music, and he would play the pung, a Manipuri drum.

On a recent visit home, Somi, who is now a film-maker, captured the Shumang Leela play, called "World Trade Center," on film. He's dicing it with footage of the tragedy and the memorial to make a documentary. Jupiter's friends want to bring the play to the US soon to be shown with the documentary.

There's a buzz about Mars these days, the red planet being closest to earth in eons. But in the hearts of America's Manipuris, it's Jupiter who shines brightest.