



Engelei

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Part 2

Growing up Post Japanlan in Imphal



Author in scout uniform 1946.

One of the ancient characteristics of pre and immediate post Japanlan (WWII) Meiteis, was the 'feel-good' factor – an extraverted quality in them that made them feel happy and positive about their lives. He might be impecunious but would deny it, saying like, *Ay,peisagidi kari amata wabiriganu*. - Please don't worry about the cost.

It must be admired that despite their impoverished circumstances, Meitei men always dressed sharp in Meitei national dress of pristine white *pheijom* (dhoti) and *pumyat* (shirt).

As part of Meitei national character that sometimes, was streaked with

foolhardiness, their mental schemata or psychological equilibrium, which was their ability to maintain a balanced understanding, often missed the point of view definition that, with reflection and rumination impulsive mistakes could be avoided, and bold strokes could be formulated. A characteristic catch phrase was, *hekta phujilaga loire*. Meaning the problem will end easily by thrashing him.

They did not understand the outside world, having no contact with it at all. They viewed non-Manipuris with a mixture of curiosity and politeness. With their distinct social norms, economic downturn, feudal political system, peculiar culture and strange beliefs, they regarded Mayangs (Indians outside of Manipur) as foreigners. It was a kind of nationalism. It was like Modi- India's promotion of India as a proud Hindu nation.

Only in the post war period after 1947, with established de novo legal nationality as Indians, and delimitation of boundaries between states, did they accept to be Indians at heart. There are still a few die-hard Meitei nationalists who had become insurgents as they had refused to be citizens of India.

Their concept of ethno-nationalism (or ethnonationalism) is the conviction in which they regard ethnicity as core components of a nation. Nationalism is an ideology, an attitude. Nationalism is also a feature of movements for freedom and sovereignty (self-rule).

On the other, there were a few excellent national characteristics of Meiteis. One of them was their capacity to adapt to horrific changes in circumstances and environment. They were very adaptable and good survivors, by virtue of their inherited trait.

They survived the 'Seven years' Devastation' in their medieval history and the Japanlan in modern history. They will endure the present Covid pandemic, which has altered every aspect of their life in ways that take

them out of their comfort zone.

There will be a lot of casualties as everybody cannot adapt to the change. This is because of the evolutionary process, known as 'The survival of the fittest by natural selection', which was theorised by Charles Darwin.

As an evolutionist I believe, adaptation to the environment is the only chance for survival. History shows that Meiteis were very capable of it. Not that everybody succeeded. Darwin put an end or nearly, to the notion of human beings being dependent for survival on a powerful God that lives in heaven.

Survival in general, depends a lot on life chances, which are individual's ability to improve his or her quality of life. Paulo Coelho, in his famous short book *The Alchemist*, describes that, it is "The Principle of Favourability" or a stroke of luck that starts a person's legend. One needs favourable circumstances to be triumphant in life.

Many boys and girls from poor families, though intelligent, will not make it to universities as they lack financial security and incentives, which are life chances. Moreover, various studies point out that children from poor families have poorer cognitive skills than those brought up in rich families.

As there will always be people as haves and have-nots, disparity will exist for ever. There is no absolute panacea. The gulf is also dependent on many factors, such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability and so on.

On a personal level and in my own little world, my survival as I am now, has been due to many life chances. Intoxicated with youth and on the cusp of infinite possibilities, I was happy riding that kind of luck.

In the present pandemic I am trying to change certain ways of my life

that are favourable, such as isolating myself and my wife from social gatherings, in order to be triumphant in the rest of whatever life I have got left. The Phoenix must burn to emerge.

Now in an upbeat mood, having stopped from drifting into a reverie. Those of you, who have read my waffle in Part 1, must be wondering who in good Heavens, I am? Now, I would like to introduce myself in the style that I have adopted since my arrival in the UK. It is for clarity. I took the inspiration from watching the first James Bond film, Dr No in 1962, the year I qualified as a doctor.

James Bond (played by Sean Connery, a nationalist Scot in real life) in the film, introduced himself to Sylvia Trench at the baccarat gambling table, while stylishly lighting a cigarette in the left corner of his mouth: "The name is Bond, James Bond". Likewise, when asked my name, I will say: "The name is Singh, Dr Mohendra Singh". I adopted this style as I had certain discomfitures in the past.

It all started in Bombay when I was a student at St Xavier's College in 1952-53. One day a professor asked my name in the class. I replied: I M Singh. He then said, "I know you are Singh. But what is your name?" Then I spelled out: I full stop, M full stop, Singh.

It was hilarious. But, if I had said, Irengbam Mohendra Singh, that would have put the wind up him. They are long winded and mouthful words. This current style was an adaptation for getting along in the British society. Now that I come to think of it, the style perfected my preamble.

Having introduced myself, here is a bit of caveat and an apology in writing my memories of long past. I am aware that a story loses something with each telling. My story is no exception. My story is 80 years old, and I have told it about a few times during my long process of aging.

The good thing about aging is that some of the distant memories of my young days still linger on in my brain. It takes just a bit longer, about 5 minutes of recalling time. Memory consists of three parts: attention, retention and recall. We are familiar with the catchphrase of old people, 'I know it. It is just on the tip of my tongue'.

Not everybody remembers all their early childhood and experience. I also remember only a bit of mine. The best part of my childhood memory in Imphal, was walking to the Primary School, as a 6- or 7-year-old and alone, barefoot, slogging on rough, dusty and potholed Uripok road, which today's children will never know.

Recollection of my childhood brings many emotions that I remember fondly. It turns out that those halcyon days were just plain fun with a jostle of interesting and sometimes agonising experiences, as those of anyone of my age must have been.

Today's children will think I lived in cloud cuckoo land that I walked to and back from school bare foot in winter or summer. I could not wear shoes as I had been bullied. No one was wearing shoes. I remember how difficult it was to peddle my first tricycle. That was precious. There was no such thing as a baby tricycle in Imphal town in those days. My tricycle was very old. It was left to my father by an outgoing British family.

Another unforgettable memory I wish to cherish for life, is the game of hide and seek that I played with my elder sister Modhu as darkness fell and the daylight eked out. How scintillating it was to chase fireflies with their blue light in the twilight in our courtyard.

Years later, I found it exciting to read that the German explorer, Alexander Humboldt (1799-1804), about the time of Hinduisation of Meiteis, found in Trinidad, the local practice of keeping fireflies in a hollowed-out gourd, pierced with holes, which, when shaken, acted as a lantern.

I wonder how true it is that American psychologists find people who have fond memories of childhood, specifically their relationships with their parents, tend to have better health, less depression and fewer chronic illnesses as older adults.

During this Covid lockdown with nothing else to do, my mental trip back in time, had covered a lot of ground. Though a bit nebulous and piecemeal, I could remember as far back as when I was five years old. It was the occasion of my ear-piercing ceremony. One cannot remember things before the age of 4. It is called childhood amnesia.

Time is a one-way street and physical time travel back in time as in science fiction, is not scientifically possible (Stephen Hawking, 1942-2018). But the mental time travel is (Sudenfof & Coballis, 1997).



Author in 1947.

This human capacity to remember their past lives, known as chronesthesia in psychology, is recent in evolutionary years. It was possible only about 70,000 years ago when the human brain developed working memories that allowed the brain to retrieve, process and hold in mind several chunks of information at one time. This was a selective advantage in evolution – the basis of for evolution by natural selection.

Reliving past events mentally, is known as ‘episodic memory’. The key feature of this mental time travel is to enable people to anticipate the

future, to prepare for what is to come. This allows us to influence the earth itself in extraordinary but not always benevolent ways (Dawkins 2000).

Keeping this in mind, I am now beginning to dust through my brain to get rid of almost all the gauzy cobwebs that hang around on my way back in time, in order that I can see what the past has done for Meiteis in the post war period.

To be a Meitei in that 'late modern period' – the period of my youth, was so easy, with simplicity in lifestyle, without luxury and indulgence. Nobody in the world knew about us. Nor did we care a damn about anybody in the world outside of Manipur.

A person who did not know about a problem did not worry about it. That kept them closer to real life problems which mattered most in their day-to-day life. But Meiteis were not that obtuse.

Despite their intellectual deficit as the average human being, they had at a minimum, the components of a metaphysics and an ethics. A metaphysics is an account of how the world hangs together. An ethics is an account of how we should live in the world.

They were for instance, in possession of certain tenets of metaphysical philosophy of 'dualism' (both Indian and European), which the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949), derogatorily called 'The ghost in the machine'. Dualism is the philosophical belief that a conscious mind (*pran* in Sanskrit or *thawai* in Manipuri) enters the physical entity of the human body like a computer.

They also had certain ethics, such as the virtues of honesty, compassion and loyalty.

It was great to be a Meitei, despite our certain hitches, such as our

trademark - the speed with which we rolled up our sleeves for a brawl in trivial matters. It was like a school blazer. We survived.

It is not easy to be a genuine Meitei now. The modern civilisation has changed Meitei social structure significantly with urbanisation, professional stratification, democratic government, secularism in religion, modern literature and arts, as well as latest technologies.

The tiny and sleepy Imphal town has now changed to a noisy sprawling city and beyond my recognition. Meiteis are now trying to bring up their children with all the mod cons of private schooling. As someone who has lived in the immediate pre-war and post-war Imphal, I find it very exhilarating to find sea change that has come over to the Imphalites.

Seldom can there have been such a culture change among Meiteis, beginning from the conservative and religious pre-war Meiteis to the secular and worldly post war Meiteis in such a short amplitude of time. This follows the nature of evolutionary change in heritable characteristics.

The arrival of the Japanlan or WWII, had hastened in revolutionising Meitei ethos. Sophistication rather than naivety had become part of Meitei culture. This accrued from a switch of simple cultural evolution to the more complex sociocultural revolution of Meitei behaviour.

The sociocultural revolution or sudden acculturation, rather than a slow evolution, in which Meiteis, while maintaining their original culture and social norms, adopted new trendy ones, had stemmed from sociocultural transmutation of values and beliefs from their extended contact with different cultures and societies of people outside of Manipur in the post war years.

As a result, many institutional changes, such as a transition from a feudal to a democratic way of life, had taken place. By institution I mean large

organisations, such as a society or a foundation or an establishment, with new rules, customs and practices. In a more academic term, an institutional change is a centralized process in which rules are framed by a collective political entity, such as the state or the community.

I happened to be growing up in this fertile period when new institutions were coming up. My historical episodic memories of Imphal that I am going to narrate go back to 1941 when I was just old enough to understand some things in life events. They would not however, be a nicely linear tale of my childhood. They are only a few events that I can remember hap hazard.

For a start, I remember the coming of Japanlan with the first Japanese bombing of Imphal town centre on Sunday, May 10, 1942. During the war I saw many ethnic peoples of different races - black, white, yellow and brown.

Following the Japanlan, even during the war, I recollect observing many changes in the general attitude to life of Meiteis. Remarkably, Meiteis after WWII, have improved their worldview, which is their attitude to life, religion, philosophy, ethics and scientific beliefs about the world around them.

They have also begun to learn how to approach life to get the most from it with little cost to them in physical, mental, emotional and spiritual strength, while understanding certain boundaries they should not cross. The most obvious break with the past was in the decline of religion as the chief determinant of Meitei identity.

The post war outcrop of Meitei Sanamahists, Christians and even Buddhist, had their part in creating a new Meitei society. The mainstay of Meitei identity as Vaishnavite Hindus however, had remained steadfast as it were after the initial Meitei conversion into Hinduism in the early 18th century (1717 CE).

The Japanese has visibly brought new experiences and fresh ideas. It has instilled among the Meiteis new swans of purpose and self-esteem, working tirelessly and steadily to get to the objective. They were as keen as mustard to go on with it.

Meitei society has settled down to creating ventures like building bridges among the various communities and working for economic and intellectual developments. Though they have begun to absorb modernism and Western civilisation with its modern technologies, they have not departed from what preceded in the past. They were still idealising nature as evidence of the transcendental existence of God.

In this post war period, for the first time in Meitei history, boys and girls from the valley and the hills would meet without strict racial prejudices. I was one of the pioneers. As a young schoolboy I had a romantic escapade with a beautiful girl from the Tangkhul community.

There have been quite a few intermarriages across the religious and ethnic divide. Such intimate social relationships did augur well for the chance to narrow the gap between the past and the present among the commonalities.

Imperceptibly, Meiteis began to think on their feet about modern civilisation. They began to reposition their culture with a new concept of society and human interactions. There was a spontaneous increase in the impulse towards rebuilding a new Manipur. They modified the social geography of Manipur with racial tolerance.

There was a development in market economy though only in the cottage industry. New novel consumer goods, such as Amul butter, Brooke Bond tea, Parker fountain pens, modern Swiss watches and radios became available in Imphal.

I remember when my father bought a small radio set for fifty rupees in

1949, to listen to modern, known as *adhunic* (matamgi) Meitei songs that began to broadcast from Radio Gauhati.

Intellectual innovations to create intellectual property in literary works, new modern songs and dramatic performances became popular cultures. Barriers to girls' education suddenly disappeared, without any underlying thought that it would alleviate poverty in the family.

Higher education for children became a priority. Parents worked their fingers to the bone to educate their sons. Sons were the only security in old age for parents, who had no old age pensions or state security benefits. Things were shaping up.

Resurrecting old history is like resuscitating the dead. Aside, the separation of the trivia from the meaningful is quite hard when some of my recollections are hazy and uncertain. Turning memories into a story with lateral thinking is brainstorming, especially in a new and modern perspective.

Well! WWII ended on September 2, 1945, when the Japanese Supreme Commander Gen Mamoru Shigemitsu surrendered to American Gen Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, aboard the battleship, USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.

Despite the official end of the war, Imphal still remained a war zone till 1946, as a few sapper units of the British Indian Army, were still there to tidy things up. As a result, many families from the central Imphal area, including ours, did not return home from the outlying villages as their houses were still occupied by army personnel. Our house was lived in by a British Army Captain with whom my father had a cordial rapport. He kept our home intact.

I was born and brought up at Uripok Khoisnam Leikai in Imphal, about a quarter of a kilometre from the Maharani Thong (Queen's Bridge) over

the Naga Turel (Naga River) that connected Uripok Road with Khwairamband Keithel.

During my school days, there used to be an annual pageant of boat race every year, on a stretch of this Naga Turel, the finishing line being on the northern side of the Maharani Thong. Imphal was never short of festivals. Meiteis were very fond of high-spirited celebrations. All classes, high and low, were indulgent in religious festivals, the principals of which were Durga Puja (Hinduism) and Lai Harauba (Sanamahism). I will come to them in a bit.

I had a very strict upbringing and parenting. No swear words would ever escape my mouth. My father, Irengbam Gulamjat Singh could be very affectionate at times, but he was emotionally unavailable. He had high integrity and fortitude. He was no-nonsense guy – a character that I had inherited. My tough-guy image thus, emerged in my formative years as a result of genetics and my upbringing environment.

As my father was the Chief Electrical Engineer, we had a very comfortable life. I was pampered and privileged, being the youngest son with two elder Brothers viz., Gokulchandra and Yaima, as well as three elder sisters, Binodini, Pishak and Madhu. I have a younger sister, Rupobati Devi.



My eldest brother Gokulchandra at the Country House.

Another exciting thing about my boyhood was our Country house at Iroishemba, about 5 miles from our house in town. It was unusual for

Meiteis to have a country house. My father was very good at landscaping and gardening. After the war, he bought an open virgin field at Iroishemba. He completely changed the topography of this bit of land.

He planted a variety flowering plants and trees. It was studded with fruit trees and sweeps of gentle rolling lawns, set against the groves of flowering shrubs. It had a shooting range for '22 rifles. It had a badminton court.

This acreage backed onto the meandering Iroishemba River and had its own pond. A long tree-lined gravel driveway connected the country house with the main Kangla to Kangchup Road, through an iron gate with the family emblem, IGS & SONS. The house was a bungalow with pitched corrugated iron sheets for the roof.



Author in the country house during one of my home visits.

Affluence had also its downside. Imphal had not been without a history of human violence, robbery and murder. They were unlike the more recent use of violence tactics using guns and hand grenades to intimidate people to part with their money by insurgents belonging to various revolutionary organisations.

In the immediate post WWII period, there was sporadic violence with looting of a few prosperous homes and murder of a couple of male inmates. One early morning, there was a scribbled note on a piece of paper that was pasted on the wall of a hut that stood at the entrance of

our slip road of Irengbam Leirak from the main Uripok Road. It was a threat to my father's life, scrolled in red ink. No reason was given.



Gravel drive to the country House from main road. Author behind tree.

My father seemed undaunted. He was quite resilient. It had a great deal to do with his personality and his ability to manage negative emotions. Approach-oriented people are more resilient in the face of stress.

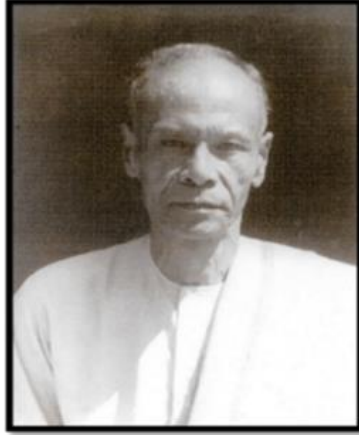
That day, my father calmly arranged with the Prison Superintendent, to see some of the dangerous criminals lodged in the Imphal Jail. He saw them and thought nothing of them. He came home and arranged for a low bed to be brought out to the mangol (veranda). There in the open, he slept in this bed every night for three months with a sword by his side. Nothing happened. Then, he resumed his normal sleep indoors.

A more sinister scare came again a few years later. I was then a bit grown up. He was a bit older. He then obtained a shot gun under license and fortified our main doors and windows with wooden bars on iron brackets at nights.

He also gave me a short sword to keep under my mattress while I slept at night in a room in the adjoining house. Like my father, I do not recall of being scared. My father's nonchalant attitude gave us no cause for worry.

Only once just before the War, I felt a bit edgy. As a small boy I used to sleep in the same bed with my father. Once, he and my mother along

with the baby sister Rupobati left Imphal for pilgrimage to Brindavan. I had two elder brothers. Still, he hired a retired Gurkha soldier who came at night and walked around our house all night with his Kukri, shouting intermittently, 'Ayo Gorkhali' - Gorkha is coming.



My father Irengbam Gulamjat Singh

My father died at the age of 96, on Saturday, March 14, 1992. He was physically well built and remained healthy until he died of old age. He had his mental faculties intact. He was looked after by his large extended family.

When I was a young boy, I resented my father for being so aloof to me. It was many years later, that I learnt it was because he, like any other Indian Hindu father, was following the Sanskrit verse for parenting:

Lalyet pancha varshani [Up to the age of 5, love him]

Taryet dash varshani [Up to the age of 10, be strict with him]

Prapte tu shodashe putra mitra vadacharet [After the age of 16, treat him as a friend].

When I finished schooling and started college education, he treated me like a grown-up with empathy. Not a single irksome word ever passed between us. An outwardly loving relationship began to emanate.

I have nothing more worth writing about my boyhood at this stage except that I want to close this chapter with the knowledge or lack of it, that I am still not sure whether my accentuated narcissism was an inherited trait as a genetic contribution to Meitei national character, or because of influence by the environment. Perhaps, it is both.

Research studies find that though genetic inheritance may play a part in the development of a certain personality, others point out that it is very difficult to know whether similarities in temperament and behaviour have been handed down the generations genetically, or whether the behaviour in children were modelled as they grew up. So, I am still no wiser. But I have my own conclusions.

As I got older, this impulsive personality began to ebb, but I could not get rid of it completely, how hard I tried. My only consolation for this dodgy behaviour came after remembering Shakespeare in the Merchant of Venice in school. He wrote, revenge is as normal as the sun rising in the morning: "If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?"

One other flurry of excitement of my childhood that lingers on in my memory is about flash floods, caused by the Nambul River in spate. It was quite a thrill. The Sagolband part of west Imphal, was connected with Khwairamband Bazaar by the ancient bridge called 'Thong Nambonbi' (hunch-back Bridge). The bridge is a sort of monument for Meitei vernacular architecture.

Because the bridge was low underneath for the passage of water, and Sagolband Road was raised higher than the Uripok settlement, the later bore the brunt of the flash flood, caused by the high-water level from the Nambul River, every 2-3 years.

During these high-rise floods, all the families living between the Nambul

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River and Uripok Road, would transport themselves on temporary bamboo rafts to the elevated top of Uripok Road, where we would stay for 2-3 days until the water level subsided.

The Nambul River during the rainy season was deep and wide enough for transporting merchandise such as thatch grass, glazed earthenware pots, dry logs, in long dug-out canoes from far-off villages like Chairen, in the southernmost point of Imphal valley.

They would oar them up north all the way to Khwairamband Bazaar. They were 'anchored' by the riverbank of Wahengbam Leikai just south of Thong Nambonbi.



#Thong Nambonbi (Hunch back bridge).

Whenever the Nambul River swelled in the rainy season and when I was about 13/14 years old, I would climb up and stand on the slag middle of the thick twisted suspension wire rope of the swing bridge and dive into the muddy river water and swim ashore. I was fearless. That was how I learnt swimming and board diving.

While several memories are shuffling like a deck of playing cards in me, a recent Manipuri newspaper report of the celebration of *Krishna Janma*, Krishna's birthday at Mahabali grove in Imphal on August 15, this year of 2020, has triggered another childhood memory that had long lapsed into reverie.

It was about my visit to the Mahabali Grove with my two elder sisters, Pishak and Madhu on this specific day, when I was 7 or 8 years old. On our way back home, we called at the Thakurbari Marwari Hindu Temple at Khwairamband Bazaar and threw a couple of paisa at the feet of the Krishna idol.

Thakurbari is an inspiring nostalgia about my mother's stall at Ima Keithel (Mothers' Bazaar). I remember the stall. It was in the front row of all the tin-roofed open market sheds. It was one of the plots, reserved for top government officers.

It was in the Maxwell Bazaar (Awang Dukan) in the first row facing the street. They sold only the expensive *phanek Mapal Naiba*, the formal dress for Meitei women, and only in the afternoons, in style. Never in the morning nor in the evening.



My mother, Irengbam Mani Devi.

One of the fondest memories of my mother, dates to such evenings. As evenings began to spread its wings and dark nights came to engulf the town, I would wait anxiously like a cat on a hot tin roof, for my mother to come home with *chanapot* (treats) and sometimes *sanapot* (toys). They were all homemade.

My mother, after the closing time every evening, had an arrangement to store her wares in the large Thakurbari building for a fee. Then, she did the shopping for the family meal before returning home. I would sit with my father on the traditional thick mat made of reeds, on the southern side of our mangol (veranda).

In summer, we had the coiled green *kanghidak* (mosquito Repeller) burning to ward off the teeming mosquitoes. In winter, we had the *Meiphoo* (charcoal burner stove), around which my father and I would warm ourselves while waiting for mother to arrive.

Some personal experiences of events that happened during heightened states of emotions are more memorable than others. We have faculties in the brain, to remember what we had learnt and experienced in the past. Our brain has a little portion to store memories (Hippocampus).

One of these engraved memories relates to a *naushum Ishei* (Lullaby). Many an evening in the summer, as the sun tipped the horizon in the west, above the Kangchup hill, and the inky dark night began to embrace the surroundings, I often looked up at the round moon in the cloudless dark sky, surrounded by stars, shining and twinkling like crystallised fireflies.

I often wondered if the tree-like impression in it, was really a *heibong pambi* (fig tree) as I heard about it from a *naushum Ishei* (lullaby). In those days, every *yumjao* (main house) had a *shumang* (courtyard).

Some young mothers would sing a *nausum ishei* to calm and hush their crying babies to sleep. They would amble about in the courtyard, with their babies rucked on their back in *ngabong* (rough cotton shawl) slings knotted across a shoulder (*angang poba*). A few lines from this classic song ran through my head:

Tha tha thabington, Oh moon, oh moon, haven of our souls

**Nacha morambi pobige,
Pobi sanam nambige.**

**Let me carry your ragdoll child
Slung with sanam fabric.**

**Heibong charong amatang
Thadabiraku thabungton.**

**Please throw down a bunch of figs
Oh, haven of our souls.**

Another haunting memory is about crows. They would squawk at the crack dawn as the sun was rising behind Nongmaijing and just below the horizon. The Meiteis in Imphal, then knew that the morning had broken.

Our family had such a crow that would give a hash caw every morning with the first light, perched on the branch of a tall mango tree at the back of our garden. It was like a wake-up call at a five-star hotel.

My father would then, wake me up to take puppies out for toileting. I would then hear waking sparrows chatter in the half-light of the morning as the ebony sky turned to ash greyish blue. I often wondered what they were talking about.

Another unforgettable experience is about the gathering of a few fathers with their small sons from our Leikai, on the lawn of our Khoisnam Leikai *Lairembi lampak* (Khoisnam Leikai deity ground) in the afternoons of hot summer months.

I can still feel the soothing afternoon breeze that wafted from the west, gently caressing my face, as I sat with my father on some sunny days. We usually sat on a spread of *ngabong* under the large and majestic *kadampambi* - Kadam tree. We children would play until the large crimson sun gingerly moved behind the western horizon, on its way to other parts of the world.

Meiteis had enjoyed moderate climatic conditions in Imphal in those days. The climate of Imphal in the summer months from March to June was mostly mild and pleasant, never exceeding 80F (26.7C). It could be

quite hot at times, about noon and after, needing a ceiling fan that my father had installed inside the *Yumjao* (large dwelling house).

The winter months from October to February were always freezing cold with fog hanging over Uripok Road in early morning as we walked to school. The rainy season with the early arrival of the Monsoon from mid-June to September, always had intermittent heavy downpours, sometimes non-stop for a week or so.

During the rainy season, many lanes and bylanes in all the *Leikais* (groups of dwelling houses with gardens) would be ankle deep in mud. Wearing of footwear was out of the question.

In winter, people were not much into wearing jackets or coats. Woollen sweaters with or without sleeves were available. Most people, men and women warmed themselves with light-weight woollen wrappers. Children and young people had seaters and child-size thick cotton shawls. Dense quilts filled with cotton wool were used in bed.

Before the war, trousers for men were not in fashion. People were a bit shy to wear them. Only some government officers donned them. *Pheijom* (dhoti) for formal occasions, and *Khudei* (narrow dhoti) for everyday casual wear, were the fashion.

People in Imphal found it hard to avoid a little festive indulgence. The most popular for children and young adults among them was the *Yaoshang Thabal Chongba* (Dancing in moonlight during Yaoshang festival).

It is unimaginable not to revoke my childhood memories of *Yaoshang* (Holi) festival. It was the most exciting time for children and youngsters in Manipur. Yaoshang was traditionally, the only time when boys and girls were allowed to meet openly for playing with coloured powder and liquid, outings during the day and for dancing at night in the courtyard.

Yaoshang mei thaba numit, the evening when the thatched Yaoshang hut was set ablaze was an enduring festival. The function always took place on the full Moon Day of March every year. It coincided with the birthday of Chaitanya, the founder of Vaishnavite Hinduism. He was born on the full moon night of February 18, 1486, in the ancient town of Navdeep in the Nadia district of West Bengal.



Author at the Birthplace of Chaitanya in Navdeep.

In the evening of *Yaoshang meithaba* a puja (devotional worship) with offerings of fruits and flowers to the idol of Chaitanya was performed. The hut was then set on fire. *Yaoshang* is Meitei word for a temporary thatched hut, used for the birth of a baby, which was later burnt as an unhallowed mess.

Chaitanya is an honorific title, meaning ‘Conscious self’. It is like ‘Christ’ (anointed) for Jesus. He is also called Gouranga (fair complexion) by his mother, and Nimai (born underneath a neem tree). His name at birth was Vishvambhar Mishra.

Those were the exciting days of my emotionally charged teenage years in Imphal before I moved slowly towards adulthood for a happy future and wellbeing. “Those were the days, my friend. We thought they’d never end. We’d sing and dance for ever and a day.” (Mary Hopkins).

