



Part 3

Bullying in Primary School in Imphal



Author in Johnstone High English School 1948.

The above photograph was taken in Imphal when I decided to toughen myself up, as hard as nails to build up my self-respect. It was partly due to my memory of being bullied at my Primary School. That was in 1941. I remembered the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. It was also due to the contemporaneous intimidating behaviour of a few physically stronger boys, who saw me as a foppish dandy.

I was quick to build my mental strength with confidence. That was mainly due to my ability to believe in myself that I had the strength to face challenging situations and not to avoid them out of fear. And that, I had the confidence to reach my full potential.

This nostalgic mental trip to my childhood came about this morning as I lapsed into reverie. This is the month of September 2020. I was sitting in my swivel chair alone in the study of our house while my wife was busy somewhere upstairs.

It was a late chilly morning. In the deafening silence I was looking out through the double-glazed glass window as an egg-wash of sunshine from the majestic autumn sun was finally spreading its warm rays and gently stroking everything in our garden. The freshness of the scene evoked the memory of my childhood home in Imphal during the autumn months.

This month of the year has been a glorious Indian late summer finish with our garden dappled in sunlight on most days. Many beautiful flowers with vibrant colours, such as my favourite Honeysuckle (Madhumati) with its pink, red and white tubular flowers, which usually gave a heady fragrance about this time, took me closer to home in Imphal.

Nostalgia for my hometown further deepened with the sight of *Singarei* (the night-blooming jasmine), a photo of which, Dr Ranjana (Daughter of my late friend Kh Dhirendra) sent me from Imphal. As I sat quietly in the chair I saw through the window, a variety of familiar birds that came every day to peck on the grains from the bird feeders that my wife replenished every morning.



Author's garden by the study window.

They were house sparrows, yellow-breasted blue tits, red-breasted robins, blackbirds, starlings, green parakeets and colourful jay birds. The indulgence broke the tedium of isolation and groundhog life of Covid lockdown.

Watching the sparrows brought me back the reminiscence of my childhood in sharp focus. I remembered many sparrows that used to flock on the thatch roof of our Yumjao in Imphal every day.

New scientific studies find that, as an evolutionary concept, bad memories come back more vividly than happy ones. This seems probable as an emotionally charged incidence while I was little, has become more memorable. It is the story of how a senior boy used to bully me every day in my primary school.

While writing my witness statement of those yonder years, with dodgy knees and grey receding hair, the recollection of my Ibotonsana Lower Primary School (LP) at Uripok, comes vividly in my mind. I was 5 years old when I began schooling like everybody else in Imphal.

In those days, we had no play schools or infant schools. In this primary school that was dusty, mud-walled, clay-floored and freezing cold in winter, I began to learn language and literacy, mathematics and numeracy.

This very primitive school was in fact, a model school of the time. It had dedicated teachers who imparted to us, basic literacy skills, such as reading and writing, and words and numbers. Because of them I have become what I am today.

The boys' school was in a field by the Uripok/Kangchup Road, about half a kilometre from Khwairamband Bazaar. It was a long hall, facing north and was partitioned into 5 different classrooms with 5 front doors, and windows. It had a door in each partition wall.

It was roofed with corrugated iron sheets and the walls were plastered with soil and cow dung. It had an elevated earth foundation, fronted by an unkempt lawn, where sometimes, classes were held in the morning winter sunshine.

At this school in winter, twice every year, a Drill Master would visit. He would pick a few well-built senior boys and give them PE instruction for one morning. To the rest of us it was an entertainment for one morning. There were no regular PE lessons for us. Nor was there any lesson on any game or sport.

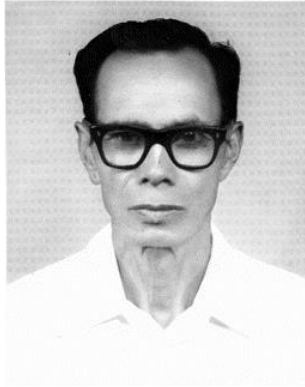
It was great when the School Inspector also came twice a year. He was an important man as he would declare the rest of the day as time-off. The teachers seemed to be very wary of him. Children's schooling at these Lower Primary Schools (LPS) began at age 5 and ended at 10.

In this school, I had a petrifying experience of being bullied by a senior boy. It was not for long though. I cannot forget the intense feeling of humiliation and helplessness that I had at that time as a little boy.

I was about 7 or 8 years of age when this happened. An older and senior boy with his friend, would threaten to beat me up unless I gave him a *pai* (quarter of a paisa) every day at the end of the school day.

I can still see his face though a bit blurred. His name was Shyamkishore (The name has just come out of the crypt of my mind). He would waylay me with his friend on my way home from school at noon. A sense of power swirled around him that scared me to death. I would not go to school in the morning unless my mother gave me a *pai*.

My mother was usually in her bed at this time of the morning. Only when she got out of her bed and gave me a *pai*, I went to school. She asked me why, but I did not tell her as I was ashamed of myself being a coward. She was curious but she did not tell my father lest he was angry.



Brother Yaima.

One day, a High School friend of my elder sister Modhu, who lived near the school, saw my timidity when this boy was intimidating me by the roadside. She told my sister, who told my mother, who then extracted the truth from me. I still pretended that I was fearless. Anyway, my mother sent my second elder brother Yaima with me to this bully's house at Uripok.

He warned his parents. That was the end of my torment. As I was better clothed and well-off than most of the boys in my class, as well as being a wimp, that boy would pick on me to get his pocket money. It left a bad taste in my mouth forever.

In the present-day Britain, bullying in secondary schools has been epidemic. Many children have been too scared to attend school. It is said, one of the major difficulties in tackling the issue has been a growing wider culture of seeing 'banter' and mockery as entertainment.

Apart from the scare of bullying boys, the teachers in this primary school were equally frightening. We were often caned by teachers on our palms for failure to learn something or the other, or for being naughty.

He would call us to the table where he was sitting. He would then tell us to stretch our right arm with the open palm turned upwards. He would cane it four or five times and repeat the same thing on the left palm. It was quite painful.

Sometimes, we would be stood up for a while, individually or the whole bunch, on the bench that we sat on. The teacher would then, cane our legs on the back. Some teachers would pull our ears or the sideburn of our head hair.

Going to a primary school was a very terrifying daily chore, unlike the present playful school system. We had black slates of different sizes for writing, depending on the parents' economic circumstances. They were framed in wood like photo frames.

We could write on both sides with a slate pencil that was fastened to a string while the other end was attached to the wooden frame of the slate. We would rub off the writing on the slate with our fingers after blowing our warm and moist breath on it. I took great care that the slate was not broken.

It was a great excitement when I was promoted to *Mangashuba* class (5th class), the final year in the school. The slates were replaced by commercial, bound paper copy books. They were lined. I had an inkpot and a wooden pen with a metal nib to write. It was great fun to make ink in an inkpot with a few grains of ink powder in water. It always stained my fingers.

My father would bring sheets of white paper, which I would fold into four squares and stitch it in the spine with a large needle and white thread. I would separate the folded sheets of paper with a kitchen knife (Meitei thang) made in Manipur. I would then write my name and address on the front page with due care. I would draw horizontal lines with a ruler and a pencil. They were used for rough writing exercises.

The collapsing of time through anecdotal recollections is an exhilarating time. This is one of them. In summer every year, our Uripok Road was repaired with earth dug up from both sides. It was then surfaced with stone chips and sand. Meitei labourers would break river stones into chips at different places along the road.

The chips were then pressed down and compacted with sand by a heavy road drum roller from the Public Works Department (PWD), while Kabui women from the town, would spread buckets of water ahead of the roller. There was always water by the roadside collected from rainfall in the dugout spaces along the road.

Uripok Road like the Sagolband Road, became rough and uneven during the rainy season as the downpour washed away the soil and sand, exposing rough bits of sharp naked stone. As these roads were not made all-weather carriageways, they did not sustain the weight of fully loaded bullock carts in winter.

Those creaky wooden carts were drawn by pairs of oxen hauled with a wooden yoke. They brought the harvest - paddies in gunny bags from villages to townspeople, who owned the paddy fields in which the villagers grew paddies.

These carts made furrowed wheel tracks on both sides of the road, turning soil into fine grey dust every winter. The sunken tracks would soon fill up with dust. Eventually the whole surface of the road would be awash with fine grey dust, which would be blown about with the inclement winter wind, covering people by the roadside with dust from head to toe.

Uripok road was dustier than any other main road as many cows and calves walked on it every morning in dribs and drabs to graze at *Lamphe! Pat*, after we children had gone to school. They would return to their homes at dusk like human beings.

These cows were kept for milk by those who could afford to own and feed them. We had 2 or 3 cows in a cowshed, near the gate of our house. They had to be fed with dry straw in the evening. My father used to store bundles of them, hung up from the rafters of the cowshed roof.

There was hardly any motor vehicle plying about. One lorry was owned by a Kangabam family in our neighbourhood. I remember an old convertible open-top car owned by a friend of my father at Uripok. Sometimes, he used to take my father and me for a short ride to the countryside in the evening in summer. It was like flying in the sky as the light summer breeze teased my hair and brushed back.

Even Political Agents did not have cars except one Mr FF Pearson, who was the last President of Manipur State Durbar (PMSD), and who became the first Chief Minister of Manipur in Independent India in 1947, one minute past midnight of August 15. To commemorate his office in Manipur, there is an area in Churachandpur, named after him, known as Pearson village.

Talking of which, I take great pride in writing this. Once I rode in Mr Pearson's car along with Ta-Gojen. It is a great history for me. It was in 1947, just before Independence on 15th August. We went to seek tickets to see Macbeth, performed by the Shakespeareana Dramatic group that came to Imphal.

They performed many shows at the Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU) Hall at Yaiskul. I found it rather unpleasant when a Congress party led by the young social activist, RK Maipaksana, was shouting slogans like "Go back home you English people. We don't need you."

By the time Moirangthem Ta-Gojen (father of Shantikumar Moirangthem, ex-IGP, Manipur) and I, decided to see a performance of Macbeth, all the tickets had been sold out. So, on that day, two of us dared go and see the Political Agent, Mr Pearson at his Residence, for

two tickets. It might sound strange that, the Residency, now Raj Bhavan, had no security guards. The two gates were always open all day and night.

The semi-circular driveway from one gate to the other was surfaced with fine red brick chips and bordered on both sides with manicured lawns of green grass. Ta-Gojen and I entered through the left gate and ambled along the long drive. We met Mr Pearson in the company of another Sahib.

They were having a chat at the foot of the high-rise Bungalow steps. Once Ta-Gojen explained the purpose of our visit, Mr Pearson was kind enough to immediately drive us in his car to MDU, along with his companion. We got the tickets.

Now, from the sublime to the ridiculous. I am back on the rough, pitted and dusty Uripok Road, on which I used to walk twice a day to school and back. What a *Deja vu*! Nothing was more enlivening than my walk to the primary school as the low morning sun dawned to the east behind Nongmaiching.

I walked barefoot like everybody else in the freezing winter and very hot summer. It was a nightmare when I went to school once, wearing some sort of shoes.

Very often, my right second toe which was slightly more bent downwards, would knock on a stone chip and it would bleed from the split skin. When it happened the first time, I came back home without attending school. I got a thump from my father when he came home for lunch at noon from his office. It was for skiving. I got the message, and I did not come back again, bleed or no bleed.

In winter, we boys wore short trousers called half-pants, and shirts. We would wrap ourselves with a small *ngabong* - a medium-weight cotton

shawl, woven on a handloom. All children from the age of 5, walked to this school unaccompanied by adults. It was partly because the road was safe with hardly any traffic. Partly it was an open and straight road.

There was a girls' Primary School at the back of the Boys' School. It was a bit smaller but on a higher foundation. The Ibotonsana LP School had been changed to an exclusive Ibotonsana Girls' Higher Secondary School in a pukka building in 1948. It is this school where the hunger-striker Irom Sharmila Chanu (Iron Lady of Manipur) did her high schooling.

As a matter of interest, I am happy to write here that I went to see Sharmila with my wife on August 9, 2016, at the JNIMS in Imphal. She was confined there judicially and was fed measured optimum calories of liquidised food daily, meticulously prepared by dieticians and religiously fed via a stomach tube by nurses.

I talked to her about the advisability of ending her 16-year-old 'Hunger Strike'. To me, the ongoing efforts of this 'Iron Lady' were becoming self-destructive for nothing as she had no chance of achieving her goal of removing AFSPA (Arm Forces Special Power Act).

I explained to her how she had become old hat after so many years. It was shame that she would disappear one day, and people would only remember her in the passing, as in the Meitei classical verse, '*ching da satpi Engelej, chin na da na kenkhiba. Oh pamuida, oh pamuida.*'



Sharmila Chanu

She did give it up a few days after I have been to see her. She now lives happily, married to Desmond Anthony Bellarnine Coultinho with two twin girls.

Walking to school on Uripok Road brings me memories of *Kangchingba* festival. In those days just before the Japan Lan, the peaceful Imphal town with its guileless people, had its own sensuous annual festival of Kangchingba, known as Rath Yatra in the rest of India.

As I walked to Ibotonsana School in the mornings and back at noon in the hot summer month of July, I was very excited at seeing rows of kang (carts), parked along the verge of Uripok Road for many days. They were there in preparation for the celebration or *Kangchingba Numit* – a day in the month of July when the decorated kang will be pulled along the road.

Kang was a square box on four wheels, big or small. It had three tall walls with an open front. It was pitch-roofed with white fabric. The three walls had canvas on which many stories from Ramayana and Purana were painted in bold vivid colours, such as the giant Garuda bird fighting the many-headed snake Kaliyah, and Lakshmana cutting off the nose of Supranakha.

Each painting told a thrilling Hindu mythological narrative about gods and supernatural creatures. It was a huge learning curve for me. I learnt a lot about the enchanting Hindu mythological stories, which I believed to be true at that time.

They made unforgettable impressions on my childhood mind, which according to John Locke, an English philosopher and physician, was a “clean slate” at birth. He called it by the Latin name *Tabula Rasa* (scraped tablet).

On the day of Kangchingba, in the late afternoon with the last delivering

rays of joyful sunshine casting a golden shadow, devotees would pull the kang along Uripok road in a razzmatazz, braying conch shells, accompanied by clashing of cymbals and beating of Manipuri drums (poong).

They would pull the cart by two long thick ropes, one on each side, up and down the rutted and pocked Uripok Road until dusk. The cart would stop opposite a leirak, a slip road, when the three gods (Jagannath and his siblings Balbhadra, and Subhadra) inside the kang with a Bamon pujari, sitting on the ledge, would be offered fruits and flowers for propitiation.

Lotus was the main flower that was offered. It is the favourite of Lord Krishna in another form, Lord Jagannath. July is also the season for lotus blooms in Manipur. The Brahmin would perform an *Aarti*, an offering of fire on a revolving small metal disc that has flames from burning a bunch of *butti* - thin strips of bamboo, six inch long (15cm), wrapped in cotton wool and dipped in ghee (clarified butter).

During this festival, every temple *mandab* in the evenings, laid out a feast of traditional *Khichri* on banana leaves with an array of dishes, such as *Hawai mangal ooti* (mushy dry peas) with bamboo shoots, and various other items. They were free for anybody to eat.

My father used to have a special Khichri with pieces of coconut and things, as well other vegetarian dishes, delivered daily at home. He also made a generous contribution to the local temple for the festival.

The eating spree was followed by a traditional open show of *Khubak lshai* (songs with clapping of hands) performed by pretty girls at various mandabs. The songs were Vaishnavite narratives about Krishna's various passionate romantic escapades with his paramour Radha, and Gopis.

Rath Yatra started at Puri in Odisha. There is a huge temple for three idols - Jagannath, his elder brother Balbhadra and younger sister Subhadra. They do not have the usual human face that Hindu gods have. They do not have ears, hands and legs. The mythology of Jagannath is that it is a Narasimha avatar of Vishnu in the form of a wooden pillar. Just a mythology story.



Maharaja of Puri, Gajpati Dibya Singh, Jubarani Rajshree Debi
Margaret Leah Singh (Author's wife) at his palace.

About 18 years ago, my son Neil and I went inside the Jagannath temple as guests of the Maharaja of Puri. His younger sister Rajshree Debi - Jubarani of Khariar, Odisha, is a very good friend of ours. But they would not let in my wife Margaret as she is English. The tourist pamphlet about the Temple, cites Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was refused entry to the temple as she was married to a Parsee husband.

During this visit to Puri, we stayed at the Toshali Sands Hotel at Marine Drive, not far from the Temple. It was booked in advance by Jubarani Rajshree.

A comical event sent our spine tingling. One evening while we were having dinner with Rajshree, the staff recognised her. Because of her association, the staff took me for royalty. They probably thought I was the King of Sikkim, who had an American wife. They began to address me as 'Your Highness'. And I played the part, not to disappoint them.



Dining with Jubarani.

One evening at dusk, as the evening sun was dipping into the sea, inch by inch, rather reluctantly, we finished walking barefoot on the golden sandy beach where tiny black crabs scuttled sideways from one little hole to the other. We felt like murdering a bottle of ice chilled Kingfisher beer. We returned to the hotel and at my request, the pool was lit up and a waiter was at my beck and call at the poolside bar. Nobody was around.

Since the bar at the swimming pool was open just for us, we drank more ice-cold beer from chilled frosted glasses than we would have done normally before dinner. It was so refreshing while a gentle sun-baked ocean wind was stroking our faces. And I left a huge tip worthy of a king.

As we sauntered back to the dining hall for dinner, the Head waiter informed me that someone from Delhi rang, wanting to speak to me, but the hotel staff told him that “His Highness couldn’t be disturbed”, and that there was no telephone by the pool side. He had to ring back in half an hour or so or leave his telephone number. The caller was a friend of mine.

Among such tongue-in-cheek, side-splitting incidents, I might share one more with you for the sheer serendipity of it. Once, I went to see a friend Who was staying with a Manipuri MP at South Avenue, the Residential

quarters for MPs in Delhi.

I was traveling in the back seat of a chauffeur-driven Mercedes car that belonged to my friend Dev Puri, who was the owner of a sugar mill in Jamuna Nagar in Haryana. The chauffeur wore a uniform with a white topped peak cap, like the one worn by naval officers.

Mercedes cars were extremely rare in Delhi in those days. And equally uncommon also was a Gurkha looking man at the back of such a posh car. On the way back, my driver was driving through the Rashtrapati Bhavan complex to Nehru Place, the residence of my friend. The complex had many military guard posts. That day, the sentries were Gurkhas in twos.

As my car passed the first post, the highly disciplined Gurkhas gave me a salute, coming to attention with their rifles. I looked behind to see who the VIP was. There was none and I thought nothing of it. By the second post when the Gurkhas came to attention, I realised why. From that post and onwards I just gave a little wave with my right hand so as not to hurt their feelings. It was just uncomfortably amusing. My life is full of amusing stories.

After these jolly interludes I am back to Imphal townspeople and write a bit of how they made progress against their economic disadvantages, while some of them were still living near the higher poverty line.

It took a long time before the Central government were politically inspired that Manipur as well as the other six states in the Northeast of India, needed a lot of financial input to develop their socio-economic infra-structure to help boost economic growth.

It has been great to see the ongoing modernisation of Imphal town. By modernity, I mean the state of keeping up with the times, like owning a smart phone or being able to own a car. More notably, I am referring to

Improvements in the general aspects of life, such as the lower infant mortality rate, scientific approach to problems and pursuit of economic wealth and not entirely in terms of vast technological innovations and socio-economic uplift that are high water marks of modernity.

The rudimentary physical changes in Imphal town centre immediately after the War, went along with a vast change in worldview of town's people. They began to consider in their own small ways, their place in the changing world. It was like a paradigm shift in its stark contrast to the pre-war Meitei thinking. They were then laid back and without any incentive for progress,



Part of Imphal City Centre. 2019

Japanlan changed all that. Manipuris have now caught up with what George Bernard Shaw once said, “Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

Imphal is now a sprawling city, fulfilling my boyhood dream. “We’ve got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.”

– DH Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s lover*.

