



Engelei

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Part 4

Post war Renaissance in School Education in Imphal



St Joseph's, North Point, Darjeeling.

Imphal may not be the most poetic place in the world. It may not be as captivating as the five snow-capped peaks with jagged edges of Kanchenjunga that turn fiery orange in the glow of the rising sun. I used to see it in the morning from the dormitory of St Joseph's at North Point in Darjeeling.



Kanchenjunga peaks as I saw from dormitory of St Joseph's.

From my experience, I tend to agree that ‘All that glistens is not gold’ – an aphorism popularised by Shakespeare in the Merchant of Venice. A book cannot be judged by its cover. Nor a sausage by its skin. Manipur cannot be appreciated from its appearance alone. It is the people and their culture that lie in the heart of a nation.

Imphal town with its majestic tree lined blue-ridge mountains, some of their peaks dipping in the motionless fluffy cloud, remains a poet’s dream. Imphal Valley is an amphitheatre created by nature with its massive Loktak Lake that nestles in the Moirang dell.

Loktak is the biggest freshwater lake in India. It remains wind-swept and unsheltered at times or limpid and halcyon at others. On certain days, the lake with a calmness from the core, ripples and dances, reflecting the azure sky on a sunny day.

Manipur never ceases to live up to its reputation. Lord Irwin, the Governor General and the Viceroy of India, when he visited Manipur in 1931, called it “The Switzerland of India”. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru described it as “The Jewel of India” when he came to Imphal in 1953.

I was there during my summer holiday when Pandit Nehru gave a speech at the Polo Ground in the company of the Burmese Prime Minister U Nu. Out of his generosity and to the detriment of Manipuris, he gifted the Kabaw Valley to U Nu. Kabaw valley is about the size of Imphal valley.



Nehru & U Nu at the Polo ground in Imphal 1953 with Bodhchandra Maharaj.

The Imperial Japanese Army, after its defeat at the ‘Battle of Imphal’ in 1944,

called Imphal *Takane No Hana* (A Flower on Lofty Heights). Meaning a flower too sublime to reach. An English Matron in 1942, described Imphal as “A little Paradise on earth”.

Historiography of pristine Imphal town, undefiled by modern civilisation, fills me with ecstatic pleasure. In 1950, my old hometown looked the same as I stepped down from a bus near the Marwari Dharmasala in Imphal. The bus brought me from the Dimapur Railhead, known as Manipur Station.

Imphal town remained resilient and sustainable, and never holding more than a few hundred thousand complacent inhabitants. I am frustrated that I am lost for words to describe such a beautiful flower on lofty heights. But I do try. Imphal is not all water under the bridge. Nor is all cloud without silver lining.

Basically, I write books because I have a passion for writing. I also scribble as it provides me an opportunity to author and publish something that is important to me. But I must accept that whatever I write will never be perfect, because perfect exists only in dictionary.

As a consolation I take to heart what Ernest Hemingway, one of the greatest American writers, once said: “Writing is something that you can never do as well as it can be done.”

I am a great fan of Ernest Hemingway since I read his book, *For whom the bell tolls* while I was at college in Bombay in 1952. He borrowed the phrase from the 17th century English poet John Donne, who answered to the question himself. “Because none of us stands alone in the world, each human affects us all. Every funeral bell, therefore, “tolls for thee.” The phrase has become world famous since the publication of Hemingway’s book in 1940 and its adaptation for a film in 1943, which I saw in 1953.

John Donne wrote it in Olde English: No man is an Iland [island], intire [entire] of itselfe [itself]; every man is a peece [piece] of the Continent, a part of the maine [main]; ... And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee [the].

I have written and published six books, and over the years I have published

more than 700 articles in the daily newspapers in Imphal. They were my great effort to connect to people in Manipur and remind myself that I am still part of the community of Meiteis.

Presently, I am involved in positive-construction daydreaming, to allow my mind to wander aimlessly back in time, all the way to Imphal, at a time when I was growing up. The practice has become a privileged paradigm of progress like the curving meandering of Chandranadi River in Canchipur, as it was described by Dr Kamal in his novel *Madhabi*.

This exercise has become an emotional pastime and a recreational mental activity for me. It has not escaped my observation that, I like all Meiteis was a happy-go-lucky person, living in Manipur where they created a self-sufficient and self-reliant society in the face of various economic obstacles.

Imphal townspeople lived contentedly for centuries in a paragon of idyllic small-town life. There was no need for them to be adventurous and go out of Manipur to seek their fortune as they were quite happy with what they had. Nobody starved. Nobody was homeless. There were no beggars in town.

There were no idiosyncratic rhythms and palpable absurd images of Meiteis of yonder years. They lived in their own little world, and as individuals controlled their own lives. They nourished their peculiar ideas and values, unconcerned with the people outside of Manipur. They lived their life with equanimity and satisfaction.

While Meiteis remained indolent, the world moved on. Time does not stand still. Change is the law of life, known as entropy in Thermodynamics. And by this year of 2020, a great many things have changed in the world, though not everything.

Manipur also has transformed in many ways. Manipur has had its share of progress, especially in the fields of political freedom, literacy and economic development. The standard of living has improved with the rise of per capita income. Imphal town has morphed into a rambling city.

The metalled roads of Imphal are jostled with rows of vehicular traffic. There is electricity and piped water in almost all houses. And the best of all, is the

coming of flush toilets and the sewage system. I find it amazing that Flush toilets were used as far back as the Indus valley Civilisation, about 2,000 BCE. As well as in Pompeii in Italy 2,000 years ago, before the Mount Vesuvius erupted and destroyed the city in 79 CE. (cf. Author's *The Ruins of Pompeii*, Points to Ponder, pp368-371).



Author at Pompeii in 1967

Another great transmogrification for Meiteis is in the Meitei national character. A profound outcome of WWII or the Japanlan in Manipur. There was no more need for positive and instrumental aggression, which was a necessity to preserve the Meitei nation and Meitei dominance in their geographical environment. This is negative affirmation in keeping with my previous hypothesis.

By the second half of the 20th century, the Meitei bellicose behaviour did seem to have changed to a more pacific disposition. There has been a general realisation that small acts of courtesy were the answer to the miasma of assertive manners. This transformation began among the plebs and students alike, in post war Imphal in the 1960s

Even I, in my late age, have become a near-pacifist like a cracked mirror that reflects my soul. It was like the moulting of a self-conscious butterfly from its chrysalis. Edification and sophistication became the norms and values in Meitei social structure. My educated guess is that this newly adapted trait – an allele of our inherited gene, could not have become actual without the modern environmental contribution that had arrived in Imphal with the vicissitudes of Japanlan.

To repeat my caveat. I contend that the rationality of my argument is based on

the presumption which is suggested as a possible explanation for this situation, but which has not yet been proved to be correct. It is linked to the Lamarckian theory of acquired character, the process by which a trait or character evolves with changes in environment.

As examples, we may look at the alteration of the old British national character, such as their reserve in manners, dress, speech, self-discipline and politeness to the present flippant average character of Tom, Dick and Harry that you find anywhere in the UK as in Manipur.

Among the old British Empire Builders, I cite Cecil Rhodes as an example of their narcissistic and arrogant character that made them invulnerable. Cecil Rhodes was a 'hero', who founded Rhodesia in 1890 (Zimbabwe, since in 1980).

He was an implacably ruthless narcissist and British supremacist. He said: "We happen to be the best people in the world, with the highest ideas of decency and justice, and liberty and peace." It therefore follows logically that, "the empire is the greatest secular agency for good the world has seen."

The British people are no more openly narcissistic now. But they do have an inner current of narcissism, according to *Open Science, Jan 26 2018*: "The contemporary Western societies promote narcissistic culture." It is something the Meiteis had for many years.

In retrospect, I can see that in Imphal in the 1950s, with higher rates of education and corresponding greater incomes and more opportunities, people were beginning to prosper economically with basic luxuries like running water and electricity though limited.

There was a sense of openness with the arrival of new technologies such as radios, transistors, electrical appliances and other gadgets. There was more contact with the cultures of other communities, outside of Manipur, to further their horizon. Modern lifestyle became popular in Imphal, but progress was slow because of financial issues. Modern utility goods had to be brought to Imphal from outside by a few Mayangs who settled in the Town centre.

Meiteis were basically inept in commercial activities that were intended for exchange in the market to earn an economic profit. Besides, lack of effective communication in the local language of outsiders in business transaction, was a stumbling block. There was no bonhomie. The vast majority could not speak Hindi or English.

But Meiteis were getting there. The Hindi films from Bombay did help the youth in learning Hindi and modernising their viewpoint. They did for me. We tried to imitate their sartorial fashion and hairstyle. Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor were favourite icons.

Modernity had entered Meitei souls. As the souls had become enlightened, they had taken the beautiful shape of the dove (St Gregory of Nyssa). Higher education gave them a wider outlook. They became more inspirational and innovative.

Efforts were made for regular coach service daily from Imphal to Dimapur, and daily flights to Calcutta by the private Birla Airlines. The discarded WWII aerodrome at Koirengei situated at 9 km from Imphal, became a convenient legacy. Because of it Meiteis had increasing exposure to modern things and lifestyle outside of Manipur. Seeing was believing.

Increasing numbers of Meiteis began to travel to other parts of India, mostly to Calcutta. Air fare from Imphal to Calcutta was affordable with only ₹ 50 one way. They brought back skills and knowledge, which helped them to boost their creativity. I was also a frequent traveller as a student during those days.

During the past 50 years I have done a lot more travelling all over India and in many countries of the world. I had seen many exquisite places and have met all kinds of ethnic people. But I have not found any place that excited me as much as coming back to Manipur physically. At this moment of time all that I can do is mental travel back in time, to Manipur.

Such stargazing took me back to the educational system of my childhood. The educational structure in the primary schools was like any Indian town education. We were taught the Bengali alphabet. This part of the story of my childhood might have been a bit rough, but its emotional heft has lingered on.

The basic educational structure in those days, began at the age of 5 at the Primary school, known as Lower Primary (LP) School. In the Primary School, we were taught in our own vernacular of Meitei Lon with a book called *Lairik Mapi* (Beginners' Book) with rhyming words, such as *Ima Ipa; Itau Inau, Tada mama; chak chao, mang thau* and so on. The book was written by a Meitei from Cachar.

Bengali was the medium of instruction in schools from 1835 till 1902. Historically, it was in 1872 when Maj Gen Nuthall, the Political Agent in Manipur, opened a first school with English language in Imphal. But it was not popular. So, it died.

During my childhood, an LP school had a system of gradation from 1 to 5 classes: *ahanba, anishuba, ahumshuba, marishuba, and mangashuba* class. The English alphabet and language were introduced in the Mangashuba class like, the cat sat on the mat; I saw the moon and the moon was seen by me. The medium of instruction was still in Manipuri, and it continued right through to the middle school and the High School.

At the end of schooling at the Lower primary schools, the children took a common qualifying examination for entry to the Upper Primary Schools (UPS) that taught from Class III to IV. Those pupils from my Ibotonsana School, went to Thangmeiband Upper Primary School, as a catchment area. I remember the absolute joy of passing that exam and starting at a new school.

For the next higher class, the pupils from the UP Schools had to sit another qualifying exam for entry to a High School that taught students from class V to X. There were three Boys' High Schools. Johnstone High English School was the top school, and it was a government school. Churachand High School and Tombisana High School were private. There was Tamphasana Girls High school located near Churachand High School.

There was a Bengali High School that taught in Bengali medium, mainly for the children of Bengali civil servants who were posted to Imphal and those who had settled at Babupara in Imphal. It was situated by the main Road, on the way to Yaikul. Though it was mainly for children of Bengal Babus (gentlemen), a few Meitei boys went to it.

My friend, the Late N Nishikanta from Moirangkhom went there. He thus spoke fluent Bengali, which became very convenient while he was studying in Calcutta.

In 1945, the old Johnstone High School near Ima Keithel, was functioning in full swing with its pre-war students. In 1946, I was in the first batch at the common UP School qualifying examination for entry to a High School. There were about 1,000 candidates.

The top 100 successful students were selected for Johnstone School. It used to be 50 before the war. The rest spilled out to the other two: the second best was Churachand High School and the third, Tombisana High School. Girls went to Tamphasana Girls' High School.

Tamphasana Girls' High School, before it was relocated near Old Lambulane, was situated on the right side of the main road to Nongmeibung, the Palace Road. It was on the same side and near Churachand High School.

Johnstone School before it was shifted to the present location, was next to Ima Keithel in Khwairamband Bazaar, in an area, east of Maxwell Bazaar (Thangal Bazaar), separated only by a tall brick wall. Tombisana High School [previously Your High School] was at Uripok near the Maharani Thong end.

Konjengbam Gouro Singh BA was the Headmaster of Johnstone, and Chingakham Pishak Singh BA, of Churachand. In those days a person with a BA degree, was regarded as highly educated. I could count them on my fingertips. People with MA degrees were as rare as hen's teeth.

There were a couple of Meiteis with master's degree, who I knew. Hidangmayum Dwijamani Sharma MA from Nagamapal, and Sinam Krishnamohan Singh MA, LB from Keisamthong, Imphal. Krishnamohan married Princess Tamphasana, in whose name Tamphasana Girls' High School was established.

I never knew what the High school fees were at that time, as I was exempt, being placed in the second position, and Elangbam Kuladhaja in the first, in the High School entrance examination. We both received a scholarship of 2 rupees

each in the beginning of every month. The money became handy as we could go to cinema halls to watch matinee shows on Sundays.

A third-class seat at a cinema hall was on a wooden bench that seated 7 boys in front, near the cinema screen. It cost 4 annas (a quarter of a rupee). The late Kuladhaja like me, became a doctor (medical). He retired as the principal of the newly established Regional Medical College in Imphal.

Another two from my class, who became prominent among the whole batch as far as I know, were RK Dorendra Singh, who became Chief Minister of Manipur and RK Sanatombi Singh who became a Session's Judge. They are all deceased now.

On completion of class X at these High Schools, students sat the Matriculation examination, initially under Calcutta University, and at my time, under Gauhati University. Those successful students were graded as having passed in First, Second and Third divisions, in descending order of merit. They could go to college outside of Manipur. But there were only a handful.

There was no college in Imphal in the pre-War period. Immediately in the post war period, a solitary DM College of Arts was established privately by like-minded educated people. Only those who passed the matric exam, were considered 'educated' and were eligible for clerical and other government jobs.

In the pre-war epoch, higher education for girls was frowned upon. Traditionally, once they were able to read and write, they were taken out of school by their parents. By 1941 at least, before the War, as I remember, the tradition had changed.

My third elder sister Modhu, who was the class fellow of Arambam Saroj Nalini Devi, a reputed writer, from Meino Leirak in Sagolband (see below), went to Tamphasana Girls' High School with the ambition of going to college, but was interrupted by the War. She was married off during the war.

Saroj Nalini marvelled by doing her MA from Calcutta and then PhD in Theology from Sydney in Australia. Her father was Arambam Ibungohal Singh. He was

known as Arambam '*Haosahib*' (Sahib for Hao people, Hill dwellers). He was a prominent government officer. During the British time, he was the administrator for the people of hill areas of Manipur, known as 'Hao' in those days. He was a modern radical, while the vast majority of contemporary Meiteis including my father, were orthodox Hindus.

This brings me to the subject of racism and intolerant attitude of Meiteis directed at the hill dwelling people and the Meitei Pangals. I will also look at how WWII helped to stop this nefarious practice prevalent among the Meiteis. Meiteis only became racists after their conversion into Hinduism in 1717. They have been taught so by their Hindu gurus as an essential practice of Hinduism.

The whole world knows that the Hindu social system is represented by the caste system, of which there are four categories that we know. Though Meiteis had no caste system, they were rightly classified as Kshatriya, the warrior caste. That did not mean anything to them as it had not changed their social structure. They simply lived the Hindu way of life that entailed segregation of some other castes and ethnic peoples.

Following conversion to Hinduism most Meiteis became pescatarians - the people who were vegetarians but ate fish. A few became vegetarians. The Hindu religion proscribed cleanliness and regular bathing habits. And thus, as a way of life, they began to dissociate themselves from meat-eating tribal communities, who also did not practice physical hygiene. As a result, Meiteis looked down on them as unclean people (mangba). They could not reconcile Hinduism in favour of communal harmony.

Hinduism is a more way of life than a religion (cf. Author's *Quest Beyond Religion*. 2006 p 125). The veneration of cows had nothing to do with Hindu religion. Nor was it because of economics. Vedic Brahmins used sacrifice cows and ate beef. Hindus stopped eating cows only in the medieval period, about the time when Buddhism started flourishing. About the time of Ashoka.

While the Hindu-turned Buddhists, including the emperor Ashoka, continued eating beef, Hindus stopped eating beef to outcast Buddhism. The high priest Hindus brought in the mythical story of Bal Krishna tending cows in Brindavan along with his cowherd friends, and how he saved the cows and friends by

lifting the Goberdhan Hillock with the tip of his little finger, to protect the onslaught of a severe hailstorm. We know this is Hindu mythology.

Eventually, Hindus succeeded in pushing Buddhism out of the soil of India. While I was a little boy just before the Japanlan, I used to take a couple tiny cows made of clay, to the neighbouring temple, on the day of Goberdhan Puja once a year, while my mother worshiped a cow that was brought to our courtyard, putting a garland of marigold round her neck.

It was thus only natural that Meiteis avoided social interface with other communities that ate cows. That included the British.

Hinduism teaches physical and mental cleanliness to its followers as one of the divine virtues and as an essential feature of the individual (Bhagavad Gita 16.7: saucum). The emphasis on personal cleanliness in daily living and a prerequisite of a bath to pray to their Hindu gods were essential features of Hindu way of life for Meiteis. Meiteis were always seen spotlessly clean and robust like their idols. They always took a bath and wore freshly washed clothes before partaking the midday fare.

The racial discrimination became more than a fly in the ointment in inter-social relationships with other communities from the hills, and naturally created animosity between them and the Meiteis. As Meiteis were the dominating people they insisted everyone else did things their way.



Part of Mera Haochongba festival.

Fast rewind 300 years ago. Among other things, Meiteis and Haos (Hill people) had inter-community feasting, wining and merrymaking, once a year at the Palace of Meitei kings. It was known as *Mera Haochongba*. It was discontinued after Meiteis became Hindus.

Although I am consumed with apologies for our Hinduised ancestors' racial profiling, I find it hard to blame them. Even during the Japanlan, slaughter of cows in Manipur for the British and American soldiers was banned on the insistence of Bodhchandra Maharaja.

The festival of Mera Haochongba was interrupted during the Japanlan. It is appreciated that the titular king Leishemba Sanajaoba Singh has reintroduced it many years after the War. It revived the eons-old affectionate bond between the hill and the valley people. This great festival takes place on the 15th day of the Manipuri month of *Mera* (October-November) every year.



(L - R): Aryaman, Margaret, Titular king L Sanajaoba, Gita at the Palace.

Mera is also the month in which every Meitei family celebrates *mera wayungba* and *Mera thangmei thanba* with verve and piety. This is a ritual in which a tall bamboo is stuck in the centre of *shumang* (courtyard) near the Tulsi plant.

Every evening a lamp of some sort is hoisted for it to burn all night. This rite has been perceived to be a day of remembrance for our ancestors, high up in heaven, with a beacon light from their respective family homes. This tradition continues today though rather lackadaisical.

The Japanlan has doctored a lot of Meitei culture and tradition. Many beliefs and behaviours, and shared characteristics began to morph like worms and insects, as avant-gardism began to impinge on the socio-cultural and economic-political dynamics of Meiteis in Imphal. Meitei narcissism is now in the past tense. They learnt how to keep their rage under control for one of the oldest reasons in the world. It can lead to self-destruction.

The post war Meiteis turned away from isolationism. They began to change the status quo as a paradigm shift, like the change of concept from the Ptolemaic (the earth as the centre of the universe) to the Copernican, system (the sun as the centre of the universe).

Although change is not always a good thing, it can bring a challenging situation to our advantage. Having come out of their cocooned world, Meiteis have begun to fly like butterflies and sting like bees as the catch phrase of Muhammad Ali. They have started to acculturate modern habits and values of other peoples to their advantage.

There was a change towards more rational, tolerant and participatory habits in the post war period. While some old traditional values remained persevered, many new cultural shoots began to sprout, like the emergence in early Spring, of the colourful and edible *Yaipal* (East Indian arrowroot) above the surface of a recently burnt-out hill face.

The late post war period was the spring equinox for Meiteis, when the Sun crosses the equator line, heading north. Consumed with a desire to break the mould, to defy conventional wisdom and shake off old prejudices, they laboured to provide education, knowledge and skills to the youth of Manipur as a whole.

The educated, as well as unlettered parents began to rethink about the place of women in society. Many girls began to be educated at the only Tamphasana Girls' High School. A handful went out of Imphal to study at colleges before and even after DM College was established.

Catching the rising tide of modernity that has brought about fundamental changes in Meitei ethnicity, laying emphasis upon rationality and science over tradition and myth, young Meitei girls in Imphal, created their own fashion in dress and hairstyle to complement the post war modernism – a period in literary history with a global movement in society and culture.

The girls of Tamphasana Girls High School were the pathfinders. How they got their inspiration is a matter of conjecture. They discarded the old figure-destroying garb of one-piece *phanek* (wrap-around skirt) that was swaddled

over their bosoms. They calmly began to hitch the phanek around their waist and wear a blouse, with a thin shawl wrapped around their top.

Another throwback that has had a makeover, was the abandonment of the traditional *Leishabi* or Moirang Thoibi hairstyle. They have opted for the sleek combing of their hair back, which was the Universal Girls' hairstyle all over the world.

A new youth culture and fashion had also surfaced among the iconic teenage boys of the '50s. They had begun to wear long trousers, rather than shorts. A few college students progressed to wearing suit and tie, which until then, was regarded as pretentious. They adopted the American GI's crewcut hairstyle and mannerisms, as well as American slang words.

The most welcome change in the post war Meitei youth behaviour, not only among the students but among the hoi polloi, was liberalism and secularism. There was no longer strict Guru (spiritual master) and Chela ('to serve'), disciple relationship between Meiteis and Brahmins. New generations of Brahmins with Meitei mothers or grandmothers have become Meitei bamons.

Traditionally, soon after the War, when I was a young boy, I was taught by my mother to call a Brahmin as 'Agya' (at your service). Whenever a Brahmin came to our house, I had to take a half-kneeling stance with both hands touching the ground. He would then extend his right arm with the palm facing down, to give me his blessings by saying 'Jay Jay'. Sanskrit words. I did not know what they meant.

I, like others, in the beginning of High school at Johnstone, used to bow and touch the ground, whenever I saw our schoolteachers who were as old as my father in their 50s, come cycling through Khwairamband Keithel, where only a handful of people were milling about during the day. That was the tradition.

Meiteis became familiar with the Sanskrit word 'Jay' from singing the Hindu hymn of *Dashavatar* (Ten incarnations of Vishnu): 'Om Jay Jagadish hare' ('victory to you the Lord of the Universe) that is recited all over India during any puja performance. While 'Hari' is another name of Krishna or Vishnu, the Sanskrit word 'Hare' is vague.

Elderly Meitei men used to recite Jayadeva's version of Dashavatar from his epic Sanskrit poem of *Git Govinda*. It was translated into English by Edwin Arnold in 1875, among others. My father also translated it into Manipuri in 1982.

I learnt this first verse of Dashavatar by heart, when I was small. My father used to take me to the local mandab during the Kang festival. He used to sing along in unison with others. The first version:

**Pralaya-payodhita-jale, dhrtvan asi vedam
Vihita-vahita-caritram akhedam
Keshava dhrta-mina sarira, Jaya jagadish hare.**

When world was water, you became a tireless vessel of the Vedas. You, in Pisces form, Keshava, Conqueror of the world, Hari. [Edwin Arnold's translation].

Summing up. An array of Meitei traditions and customs changed for the better since the Japanlan. Such changes were universal through diffusion and contact with other cultures and ideas. The Meitei community also unlocked to construct a spanking new society to pursue its interest.



Kanglasha before destruction (1981). After reconstruction (2007)
(author & Kh Dhiren in foreground).

It will take more than the physical limits of the surrounding mountains to imprison the avant-garde Meitei ethos. As Richard Lovelace wrote in his famous poem: *To Althea, from prison* in 1642. "Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor Iron bars a cage." The verse has been after my heart since I learnt it in college in 1953. Manipur may no more be green, but it will still be glam.

