

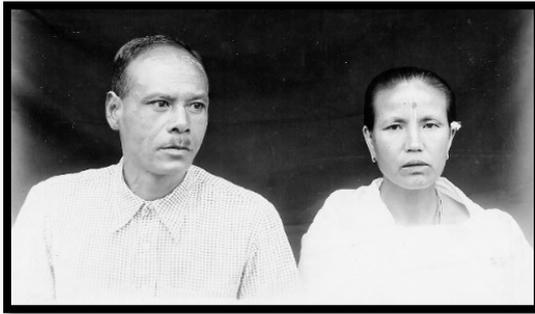


Engelei

77

Part 5

Chandon Shenkhai Mangba Shengba



My father Irengbam Gulamjat Singh and mother Irengbam Mani Devi, 1950.

In these wintry days of my life, the fragrant memories of my youth, have become utterly beguiling. As old age dashes events in my life, I feel fortunate to be able to write something of the virgin landscape of Imphal with its historical baggage and its people.

It is for the benefit and inspiration of the *Generation Alpha* (born between 2010-2924) in Manipur, who are berthed during this Covid Pandemic of 2020. It is said that this Alpha generation in history, will be the most educated with religion going out of the window.

The lockdown with a dull mist of anxiety over my eyes, has also brought out certain emotions in me. Suddenly, my memories of 80 years leapt off the pages and they came alive. Among them, the recollection of me

first entering to my primary school which I mentioned in the previous chapter, came out in the form of a gusty sigh, with an unshakable sense of historical destiny. This has made me aware that there has been a gap in my life, between orotund rhetoric and prosaic achievements.

Countless happy memories of my childhood and youth are embedded in this reminiscence. The bad begins and worse remains behind, says Hamlet to his mother. Perhaps, age is eroding my confidence in the present. While glorifying my past with positive memories I feel chagrined in my present-day living.

I have also become less facetious and much less au fait in the face of the novel corona virus that has taken the world by surprise with its inordinate virulence. Making the situation even more scary, the late Shanti had warned me that a couple of my seniors who were prominent figures in Imphal, could not complete their memoirs as they became too disabled due to their advanced age. He was periphrastically coaxing me to hurry with my memoir before anything happened to me.

Mea culpa. I have been trying Shanti. I have been in much worse situations and have survived them. I have begun to look on the sunny side of life. I see the glass half-full, not half-empty.

Writing this memoir has helped me to keep my mind sharp and improve my memory. I also do my daily pranayama or breathing exercises while being positive. This gives me an inner tranquillity with self-composure and serenity. I know now that pranayama slows my heart rate and helps me to relax.

My heart rate is on average about 60 per minute like that of a trained athlete due to abdominal breathing that stimulates parasympathetic nerves to the diaphragm. This knowledge makes me happy.

Psychologists say that happiness in life increases in middle age. I have

reservations about it. Happiness as I understand it, is an emotional state of satisfaction and fulfilment in life. I cannot quantify any palpable change in my happiness patterns throughout my entire life though there were different types of happiness, such as the joy of passing an exam, love and romance of youth and settled married life of the mature age.

My happiness in this ripe old age, is my ability to recollect many forgotten events of my childhood. Nothing is more delightful than being able to recall certain names and events that have completely disappeared over my mental horizon.

These memories are the treasures of the heart. Among them, nothing is more cherished than the pleasant memories of Imphal and the carefree days of my youth with a mendacious kind of tradition and literalness.

I know one cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. But recapturing the memory of my humble childhood and growing up in the slowly urbanising Imphal town are positive emotional landmarks that increase my ability to hold in my mind a map of a person, place, or thing.

Meiteis just before the Japanlan, continued to live in the backdrop of untrammelled landscape of Manipur, scraping by for a living, amidst scenery of surpassing loveliness. They never lost their edge though they relied on the meagre resources that sustained their living. Their low economic status did not seem to make any deleterious impact on their physical and mental health.

As I remembered, Meiteis in general, had a muscular physique and no one suffered from pathological depression. They were nonchalant people. The ancient Meitei life was aptly described once, by my friend N Brajakishore, who paraphrased it, speaking metaphorically: *eikhiodi khudei ama shetlaga pangnung nungngaiba jatni*, meaning, I can be quite happy just wearing a *khudei* (a medium-wide checked loincloth - informal Meitei men's garb). A minimalist lifestyle.



Meitei Khudei.

It is truism that we must remember the past in order to avoid its repetition. This was the aphorism of the celebrated George Santayana, though not exactly in these words. I think most Meiteis today, venerate the imperative to remember some of our history to forge a better life ahead. We remember the 'seven-year devastation', the farsightedness of Maharaja Gambhir Singh, the bravery of Poona Brajabashi, and the agility of Jubraj Tikendrajit.

In understanding not so distant historiography I have discovered two salutary splodges in our collective history, the nature of which I feel, should be avoided in future. I am referring to the negative educational establishment during the days of our monarchical system and the religious exploitation of Churachand Maharaj in Manipur. As they were, they have now been moved into the trash bin of history.

Manipur was left in its pristine state, uncorrupted, unspoiled, and undeveloped by the British to our own devices as it was under British Paramountcy. Nearly half of India was directly ruled by the British. The rest, about 600 native states were independent kingdoms, known as Princely States (downgrading their status below the British king).

These princely states in India were indirectly ruled by the British. Manipur was one of them. They were nominally sovereign, but they accepted the principle that the British Crown ruled over them. This was known as 'Paramountcy'. In return, the British provided public

services like the Railways on their behalf and collected taxes. In Manipur it was a mixture of British colonialism and Meitei feudalism. The British allowed the Maharaja to have control only over the religio-cultural aspects, policing, and education.

This bit of history may upset students. Manipur was a basket case. Pardon my French. It was unfortunate that our Chandrakirti Maharaj, as well as Churachand Maharaj who was educated at the Princely School of Mayo College in Ajmer [Eton College of India], had no incentives to educate their subjects. We should remain ever so thankful to Sir James Johnstone, who introduced English education in Imphal.

We were lucky that Churachand Maharaj fancied having electricity at his Palace and of course, in the British Reserve for British officers. He casually mentioned about it to the Political Agent. And lo and behold. There came electricity to Imphal.

It was so easy for him. "The Maharaja having decided that Imphal would benefit from a supply of electricity, the [civil] engineer [Jeffery] sent for a manual on how to erect a hydro-electric plant, of which he had no first-hand experience. He studied the instructions, and then he and his men [My father Gulamjat and others] set to work. (cf. IMPHAL, Evans & Brett-James, 1962, p 22).

I can't help wondering whether Maharaj Churchland's lack of creative thinking or convergent thinking had something to do with his poor genetic inheritance and impecunious environment. As the old maxim says: The apple does not fall far from the tree.

Boy Churachand was picked up from the dirt by Major Horatio St John Maxwell - the first Political Agent, to be the future king of Manipur, rather than from the descendants of the ruling king. He was the great grandson of Nara Singh Maharaja, with no claim to the throne. He was the youngest of five brothers and he was 5 years old.



Major (later Col) St John Maxwell (1891-1905).

Maxwell knew boy Churachand would make perfect raw material to be schooled in the British ways and elevated to raja (no longer maharaja), with a reduced salute of eleven guns. It was with the view that he could be taught to be a 'pliant puppet on the throne to the British interest'.

And the British interest was to keep Manipuris to be 'obedient servants' and illiterate. Until Independence in 1947, all the public servants in Manipur, had to put their signature in the complimentary close of any letter as 'Yours most obedient servant'.

That was also the custom for students when writing a letter to the headmaster of the school. I remember when we were taught to change the format immediately after independence, to 'Yours faithfully', for formal letters, and if you do not know the name of the person you are writing to, and 'Yours sincerely' if you know the person's name.

This brings me to Niccolò Machiavelli in his thin book (1513 CE) 'The Prince' of 88 pages. It is a short political treatise on how to acquire power, create a state and keep it. Machiavelli recommends caution around ambitious non-obligate elite, because they always ruin the ruler in adversity, and care more about themselves. Additionally, he expounds, it is far easier for a ruler to defend himself against a small fraction of elites than against an organized movement of people.

In the selection of boy Churachand as the ruler of Manipur the British had some Machiavelli in it. Here is a quote about what the British

thought about boy Churachand. A letter by Major W Hill, commanding 1st/2nd Gurkhas, 17 September 1891. It is extracted from the book: *Manipur Mischief* by William Wright, 2018, pp 231, 232).

“Yesterday, Maxwell, the Political Officer, went to the village where dwelt the great grandchildren of a one-time Raja of Manipur. He was shown a very poor tumbledown hut, in which dwelt in poverty, bordering on starvation, the family he sought. Paraded to his inspection were four dirty villagers, and they were described as the great grandchildren of the late rajah, Mir Singh. Is there not the other, the Benjamin [Sic. the youngest child], the child who was born at the time of his father’s death? A small urchin, beastly dirty, and as naked as truth, was produced, and Maxwell informed the five-year-old brat that Her gracious Majesty the Queen- Empress had been pleased to command that he be made a king, and then, turning to the proud mother, presented her with a cake of soap (this is no joke, but a solid fact), and bid her wash the king.”

The boy Churachand was not called even by a common noun ‘boy’, but by degrading words like urchin and brat. Their opinion had not changed by the time he died at Navdeep from pulmonary tuberculosis on November 6, 1941. ‘A king who had no interest in the administration of Manipur’.

Instead of establishing a college for higher education Churachand Maharaja paid more attention to introducing sports like cricket to peasant Meitei subjects. It was like throwing pearls in front of pigs. They will only trample them. It would have cost him less than a quarter of what he spent for British war efforts, to get his titles of KCSI, CBE.

After the defeat at the Battle of Khongjom on April 27, 1891, Meitei men’s way of life in the Imphal valley, changed drastically, as the British Administration took over the defence of Manipur.

There was no more *lalupkaba* for able-bodied Meitei men. There was no more soldiering to do. Imphal had no facilities for higher education. University education was necessary to shape their future and to drive innovation and skills. They were in the doldrums.

The new system of governance began when the British Authorities handed over the education and the judiciary sections to Raja Churachand Singh on May 15, 1907. He was to be helped by a Durbar with eight members. The Raja was the President, and the Vice President was a British ICS officer.



Churachand Maharaj [photo credit: Public domain].

The supreme power rested with the Political Agent, who was answerable to the Chief Commissioner of Assam in Shillong. The British, in the person of the Vice President, oversaw Hill Tribes, finance, and state revenue.

An armed police battalion known as The State Military Police (SMP) was first set up under MLF Crawford, the Assistant Political Agent on March 31, 1893. EF Hughes was appointed the first Superintendent of the State Military Police (SMP). Later, the SMP battalion was handed over to Churachand Maharaj as the Commanding Officer until he was relieved of the post on June 1, 1941. He died in the following November of 1941 in Navdeep.

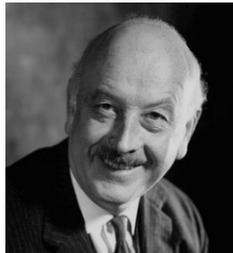
The SMP was established to keep peace in the Imphal Valley. They were

armed with single-shot Lee Enfield 303 rifles that hold only a single round of ammunition and must be reloaded manually after each shot. For the hills the British kept their own troops of 4th Assam Rifles. One unit was based at Ukhrul and the other at Tamenglong to fly the British flag. They were armed with magazine-loading 303 rifles. Each magazine had 5 rounds.

About that time, the state revenue was about 8 lakhs. The annual tribute to be paid to the British was Rs 5,000, which went up to Rs 50,000 in due course. The British style taxation system was introduced. The house tax was Rs 2 per house in the valley and Rs 3 in the hills.

In 1913, Churachand Maharaja ceased to be the President of the Durbar. He remained immersed in the pursuit of pleasures, such as horse racing in Shillong and other appurtenances of monarchy, while enforcing such supercilious rules, like prohibiting any man from having the adjective of “lbungo” in front of a name, while his wife Maharani Ngangbi prohibited any woman wearing a certain colour known as *Thambal machu* (lotus-pink colour) of *Phanek Mapalnaiba*.

A British officer, usually a young ICS officer, became the President, known as PMSD (President of Manipur State Durbar). A permanent bungalow was built for him. The last PMSD, Mr Francis Fenwick Pearson became the first chief minister of Independent Manipur in 1947.



Later day photo of FF Pearson who became the first Chief Minister of independent Manipur on July 1, 1947. The village of Pearson in Churachandpur was named in his owner. He died in 1991 (aged 79).

Following the British rule, life was going on swimmingly for the Meiteis until the economic policy of Maharaj Churachand, unhindered by the Political Agent (non-intervention policy of the British) brought chaos to the people of the valley.

It had also accrued from the British economic policy of free trading in Manipur with other states, whereby, the local Marwaris living in Imphal exported rice to Kohima and other Military establishments with licence from the Maharaja.

It was a disaster for Manipur with shortage of rice and famine. This led to a female uprising, known as the Second *Nupi Lan* (Female Agitation 2) in 1939. Only the Maharaja Churachand who was holidaying in Navdeep at that time, had the power to stop the export of rice by the Marwaris. It needed his signature to cancel the export licence. Helpless and on the insistence of the female agitators, the Political Agent Grimson pulled the fuses off the Marwari rice mills in Imphal.

History tells us about the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb of the Mughal Sultanate in Agra or Adolf Hitler of the Third Reich in Berlin, who persecuted people with other religions. But in Manipur, we had Churachand Maharaj in Imphal, who persecuted Meiteis with his own religion of Hinduism. An appalling violation of religious freedom, deprivation of civil liberties and a huge increase on 'poverty burden'.

In cahoots with the Court Brahmins known as Brahma Sabha (Brahmins' Assembly) at his palace, Churachand promulgated two religious edicts for Hindu Meiteis: (1) *Chandon Shenkhai* and (2) *Mangba Shengba* in the 1930s.

Those heinous dictates caused profound miseries on Meiteis. They were serious ethical violations, deprivation of civil liberty and an increase on the 'poverty burden'. He weaponised the Court Brahmins to extort money.

The *Chandon-Senkhai* was taxation for the privilege of putting Vaishnavite sect mark of *Tilak chandlo* of sandalwood clay– *chandon thinba* in Manipuri, on the forehead of Meiteis. These were two vertical lines that connected near the bridge of the nose to form a “U” shape called *Urdhva pundra*. Some men had extra paint on the bridge and the fleshy apex of the nose as a tear drop in reverse. Older men like my father, had extras with Hare Krishna in Sanskrit Alphabet on their foreheads.



Manipuri girl with chandon on her forehead
Photo credit: Pinterest. Lalit photography (public domain).

Another such religious persecution for money was the social outcasting of some men, sometimes the whole village, under the *Mangba-shengba* (unholy-holy) edict from the Brahma Sabha, which was authorised by Churachand Maharaj. They were designed to obtain money on preposterous charges. It was directed to anyone who, the Brahma Sabha had the ricketiest of excuses to pick on.

Its proclamation was the law like the Islamic sharia. Once declared mangba, the person could only be consecrated (*shengdokpa*) by payment of a stipulated sum of money to the Brahma Sabha and to the king. Until then, the person and his family would remain social ostracised, excluded from social functions, irrespective of their suffering.

A handful of elite Brahmins at the Palace, who formed the Brahma

Sabha were the wicked perpetrators. They found the victims through informers like spies. The hardships of the marginalised victims as social castaways, while trying to find the money for resurrection, was such sadness that it weighed upon them like a physical pain. It was like being pricked exquisitely with a pin and then being whacked on the head by a mallet.

Some people do find pleasure when others are suffering or demeaned. It was my father's turn to agonise for the gratification of someone. I have only a vague recollection. I remember how my father was declared mangba in the winter of 1941. It was hardly anything that would be of negative normative significance. He was snatched on by a neighbouring Brahmin who had a row with my father.

The Brahmin had reported to Atombapu Sharma, Head of the Court Brahmins that, my father was patronising a poor Sanskrit-educated Brahmin, Nilamani Sharma, who had been degraded as a low Caste Brahmin by the Brahma Sabha. He and others like him, were not allowed to perform as Hindu priests.

My religious father had Agya Nilamani, as we called him, came to our house, on the first Sunday evening of every month, to read Shrimad Bhagavad in Sanskrit and translate it to Manipuri.

Just for him. This jobless Brahmin was very impecunious. My father gave him a rupee each time. That helped him a bit as he had no income. Later, after the war, my father built a temple and a mandab for him in his own Ingkhol (homestead).

When my father was declared 'mangba' he was furious. But he was not particularly bothered. As ill luck would have it, a younger brother of mine, named Leihao who was 2 years and 8 months old, died from dysentery during this crisis. Nobody dared to come and help my father with his son's cremation and other religious functions.

Soon the message filtered through that he could have shengdokpa (purification) on payment of certain sums of money. My father on principle, refused to pay the usual fee of 83 rupees and 3 annas to the Brahma Sabha, and Rs 500.0 to Churachand Maharaj. He was planning to cremate his son himself.

In the meantime, my father being a prominent British employee, Mr McDonald, President of Manipur State Durbar (PMSD), intervened. He persuaded my father to have a compromise. He was to pay the smaller fee to the Brahma Sabha as a token while the large fee for the king was being waived. So, he did. That was the end.

This was a time when Lamyamba Irabot defied the edict to help these anguished people. Irabot and his followers helped to cremate these beleaguered dead bodies. They even disinterred corpses and cremated them.

While I am on this subject of *mangba-shengba*, it might be helpful to explain why Meiteis practised racism against tribal communities in Manipur. It was partly because of Meitei's ritual purity and hierarchical practice of Hinduism, and partly because these communities ate meat, especially cow's meat, which was unholy to them.

This ethnic profiling was dead serious among Meiteis. If anyone from the communities of Lois, Chingmees, Pangals, Yaithibies or Europeans had set a profane foot even on a Meitei mangol, the house had to be abandoned as unholy, deconsecrated. The practice was not entirely of Meiteis' doing. It was among the Hindus all over India.

Some of you who have stayed at or seen the Taj Lake Palace Hotel in Udaipur, must be familiar with its history. The Hotel was once the Summer Palace of Maharana Jagat Singh II, built on an island in Lake Pichola.

Previously, he built a summer place in the lake nearby, which he had to abandon as it became unhallowed after he once gave sanctuary to a fleeing Muslim Sultan. The ruin of the old palace still exists nearby. It became well-known after the James Bond film “Octopussy” (1983) was filmed there on location.

Such racial profiling took place once, in our own home, following the illness of an elder sister of mine, Pishak Devi. She told me that in 1940, she was seriously ill with typhoid fever. The British Dr Bower, from the Civil Hospital in Imphal came to see her at our home as requested by my father.



Lake Palace Hotel, Udaipur. Early morning view 1984.



Margaret, Anita and Neil. Abandoned old Lake Palace, Udaipur 1984, where James Bond Octopussy was filmed.

My father who was acquainted with British officers every day in his job, could not allow Dr Bower to come up on the veranda of our house, let alone come inside the house for fear of ostracisation. She was brought out, lying in her low bed, to the edge of the veranda so that the doctor could examine her while he sat on a mora (round stool made of bamboo

strips) in the courtyard. The British officers did not mind.



Lake Palace Hotel. 2nd visit 1990. By the swimming pool.

Until the 1930s, a British Civil Surgeon was posted in Imphal. By the time I met one with my father in 1953, he was a Bengali called Gangesh Babu, the last Civil Surgeon. The civil Hospital had 80 beds. I also associated with the hospital in 1964. There was another small hospital for patients with tuberculosis, near about Koirengei, at the foot of a hillock.



Author seated front (right) at Old Civil Hospital, Imphal 1964.

The British administration also provided facilities of an animal hospital in Imphal. It was called Shal hospital (Veterinary Hospital) and the doctor as Shal doctor (Cattle doctor). I remember the Hospital - a longish brick- built building by the main road leading to Nongmeibung and just past the Sanjenthong Bridge.

Following the War, Meiteis turned over a new leaf as a fresh wind of change had wafted into Meitei society. It was an attitude towards accommodating cultural differences. About this period, tea shops

known as hotels that were run by bamons (Meitei Brahmins) in the town centre, began to serve tribal people from the hills and Meitei Pangals from the Imphal plain.

I remember one day in 1948, Moirangthem Gojendra, father of Shanti and I brought a Meitei Pangal, Helim Choudhury to the famous Agya Pishak's Hotel, after a game of hockey at the Polo ground. Helim was a very good hockey player. He later became General Manager of Manipur Transport. I remember meeting Helim many years later when both of us were Guests of Honour at the 8th International polo in Imphal in 2014.

Undeniably, in the post war years Meiteis had begun to adapt to the constantly changing environment and developed new behaviours to cope with changes. Agya Pishak had no problem with him. This was really the beginning of Meitei liberalism.

I also grew up to be libertarian as my father was. In my mid-schooling, while studying biology and physics, I became more secular. I began to believe in evolution as the origin of human beings (cf. Author's Book, *Quest beyond Religion, The Origin of Life*. p273). Evolution helps me to understand human origins from nature and that we were not created by a God.

Overall, Meiteis who changed their culture if not traditions, by conversion into Gauria Vaishnavism, began to relax in terms of their religious orthodoxy. They began to be aware that the mystical tradition of contemplating prayer does not help in their daily living. Being less religious does not make them less happy. It is the country's level of development that affect people's happiness.

I will end this Part with George Bernard Shaw for intellectual nourishment. 'The fact that a believer is happier than a sceptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one.'

