



Engelei

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Part 7

Meitei Yumjao & Landmarks in Imphal Town Centre



Author's childhood home, YUMJAO.
Now 80 years old. Artistic masterpiece in its heyday.
Author standing during one of his home visits.

It is a miserable early December morning of 2020. It is dark, chilly, and sleeting outside. It was snowing last night. Our garden at the back and in front are all white. The leafy branches laden with frozen snow are struggling to keep their poise. With the central heating on at 22C, I am

back to open my personalised daily schedule, which is writing memories of Imphal town and its people of my school days.

During this Covid pandemic, life has taken on a slightly surreal feel. I have often listened to my heart in silence, which was deafening while sitting alone in my computer room. I have remained glued to computer day in and day out, while my wife has also been engaged in her daily household chores.

Most provisions for food and drinks were delivered home with on-line shopping. She still schlepped in the snow wearing snow boots to collect newspaper from the local shop, which was the only contact with outsiders, wearing her masks.



Underside of the Mangol of the Yumjao with glass-smooth walls, painted with light Robins egg blue clay. 80 years old and still standing intact.



Author's modern house.

Since the Covid lockdown that began in March 2020, I was set in this routine of writing my memories on the computer as soon as I got up at 10 in the morning. While I was washing and refreshing, part of my mind would start the journey back home. I would have two mugs of tea and two plain biscuits.

This practice of writing has helped me to speed up my memory's delayed recall system that comes with ageing. Some of my repressed memories have come out like worms from woodwork. Writing has indeed, sharpened my memory. It has also stopped my mind skittering like a needle across an old-fashioned vinyl record. It is so invigorating.

As an uptick, my life has found a balance. It is no more overwhelmed with a horrible emptiness. I make time for things I have to do, and I have time for things I want to do. Living life in the present, requires me to remain focused in the present and to live wisely and earnestly, as Gautama Buddha said in his first sermon at Samarth near Varanasi. I also remember the adage: 'Yesterday was history, tomorrow is mystery and today is living' (anonymous writer).

While trying to capture the past events with a blurred lens of nostalgia, I have resorted to one of the fundamental technical devices of historical writing – 'periodisation', as much as I can. That is categorising the past into discrete blocks of time. Not the right sequence in my case.

In this Part, I have simply chosen to write a bit about the ancient history of Meitei Yumjao (Big House) so that we remember it as our historical relic. There is hardly any Yumjao in Imphal now. It was the greatest landmark of Imphal town. Every ingkhol or homestead had one Yumjao.

My nostalgic reminiscence of Yumjao fills me with pride about its elegance and artistic vernacular designs with which I have a fond attachment.

While pointing out other landmarks of Imphal town centre, including the cinema halls, which are now non-existent, I will also touch lightly on what the Hindi films in these cinema halls, contributed to modernising ideas among the youth of Imphal in the immediate post war period.

Not only did the Hindi films help the youth in learning the language, but it also helped them to understand how the different communities in India lived their life. The Hollywood propaganda war films showed how WWII was fought in Europe. Watching *Les Misérables* taught students about the French Revolution, and *Romeo & Juliet* about Shakespeare.

In those twilight years just after WWII, a visitor to the town centre, would see many Meitei men who thronged at the Khwairamband Bazaar every evening. They lived in typical dwelling houses, known as Yumjao. A Yumjao was the pride of Meitei architecture. Its architectural design had been drawn in indelible ink made of lamp soot, lac etc. on indigenously made Meitei che (paper), and previously on the bark of Agar tree.

The instructions were written in Meitei alphabet in ancient times. It was called Yumpham. Legend had it that the construction of Yumjao had been introduced by a mythical king named Khooi Ningon, and I understand some alterations had been done during the reign of King Khagemba 1597-1652 CE).



Through the Gate to the town house & my Vespa scooter.

A Yumjao would be built with vernacular design by indigenous engineers after laying the foundation stone (Jatra Hunba) on an auspicious day. All Yumjaos had bamboo pillars or posts and were roofed with thatch grass. The more affluent people had bigger Yumjao with wood pillars, especially for the veranda.

A Yumjao would last years and years. My father was a modern civil engineer, but he had to employ a native house builder to get his Yumjao built. The house lasted 100 years until it was demolished recently, by a family member, to construct a modern house. The old Yumjao needed only its thatch grass replaced once a while. It stood the ravages of earthquakes, gusty wind and raging storm.

The Yumjao was always built facing east, to get the morning sunlight and sunshine. It had a big front door with a window on each side. Usually, most Yumjaos had no windows on the sides. Our Yumjao had 4 windows, two on each side.

At the back of its northern wall, a door was always fitted. It was called awangthong (north door) for access to and from the back. There were no partitions built inside. But some people would have them partitioned with hanging mats made of reeds. Our Yumjao was partitioned with custom-made sheets of interwoven reeds.

The southwest corner of the house was the abode of Lai-ningthou (King of lai or deity) Sanamahi. It was called Sanamahi Kachin. He was worshipped every evening with a lamp of some sort. At the centre of the house there was a phunga, a small hearth, in which the paddy husks burned gingerly all day and night. A metal tripod called Yotsubi was kept over it for heating water in a metal or glazed earthenware pot.

This phunga was practical for warming the inside of the Yumjao in winter. And around it the head or heads of the family would sit with children, while waiting for the evening meal. It was also essential for

heating water to wash dirty feet that had been walking all day barefoot, as the last thing before going to bed. It was done in a khudeng (wide shallow circular tub made of hard wood or galvanised zinc).

Just north of phunga was the sacred place of the female deity Leimaren. She was especially worshipped during the Meitei Cheiraoba (New Year). Just west of phunga was a hole dug into the floor, called phunga Lairu – another sacred place.

The bed of the head of the family (usually the father) was placed at Luplenkha in front and by the south wall. Mother's bed was behind that of father on the same side. Children slept at various places close to the wall, leaving the central portion unoccupied.

Traditionally, there was a big free-standing chest where family valuables were kept. We had ours between the beds of my father and mother, as well as two modern almirah (almoire – French = wardrobe).

The kitchen was traditionally situated in the northwest corner, further west from the awangthong. It had no chimney or window, which made the room a bit smoky. The oven was moulded with clay. Fire logs, or straw for the poor, were burned as fuel for cooking. Alloy bell-metal pots were used for cooking rice. Dinner plates (pukham), bowls (Tangot) for curry dishes, and drinking water jugs (Khujai) were also of bell-metal.

Vegetables were cooked in glazed earthenware or terracotta pots (uyan), made by the 'Loi' people, non-Hindu Meiteis in far off villages in the south of Imphal valley. Wrought iron pans or woke (khang) were used for frying fish and vegetables. The kitchen was always kept, clean, tidy, and hygienic.

The Yumjao invariably, had a large open mangol (veranda) in front, as a lounge and for receiving guests. It was also used by women to weave their handloom fabrics. By custom, on the southern side of the mangol, a

mat made of reeds known as Phak, was laid every morning for the head of the family, usually the father, to sit on cross-legged. It was a venerated seat. Nobody was to intrude upon it. The mat was usually thin but could be as thick as 10cm and expensive, for the well-off.

Usually, a dry bamboo jar about 14cm tall was hung up on the front end of the southern wall of the house in which the home-made 'toothbrushes' were kept. These toothbrushes were flat, thin sliced bamboo sticks; 150 x 5 x 2 mm. One end had to be chewed first to turn it into a fine brush.

The long edge of the stick was used for scraping the tongue. They were meant for the father. He would then, rinse his mouth with water from a metal jug that was laid out there by the womenfolk of the family, early in the morning, before the head of the family got up.

A Yumjao was in an Inghol (homestead or garden house). The word Inghol has no English equivalent. So, during the British Raj, it was registered as such.

The Inghol had a shumang (courtyard) in front of the house, at the centre of which there was always a Tulsi plant (Indian balsam) with a circular slight raised area around it so as not to be waterlogged, called Tulsibong. Tulsi is sacred to Hindus. It symbolises purity and represents Tulsi Devi or Laxmi, the consort of Vishnu.

A Meitei inghol is his castle. Every inghol was fenced on three sides with dry bamboos slats, which grew aplenty in the back of each Inghol on 3- or 4-foot high earth mounds. It had a gate made of two upright bamboo poles with 3 or 4 holes through which slimmer bamboo poles passed through, either to close or open the gate.

An average inghol had a rectangular barn-like building (outhouse) by its eastern boundary, open on the west side, towards the inkhol, known as mamang shangoi (front outhouse). It was meant for holding social

functions. It was also built with bamboo, mud walls and thatched roof. Some rich people with a bigger ingkhol, had another such outhouse on the north side, open on the south side, towards the ingkhol, known as awang shangoi (northern outhouse).

Our awang shangoi and mamang shangoi were built with wooden pillars and roofed with corrugated iron sheets. As my father was an engineer, he kept the earth floor very smooth and level. Because of that, our awang shangoi was often used for playing the indigenous game of Kang sanaba, during the 5 days following Cheiraoba or the Meitei New Year.

The mamang shangoi, was used conveniently for various functions, especially for Tarpon utsav katpa (A Hindu religious feast of offering of food to our dead ancestors). It was an annual event in the Meitei month of Langban (September) when menfolk from the Leikai (block) were invited to a communal midday feast of vegetarian dishes.

In such Ingkhol, most Meitei families grew a variety of vegetables, such as cabbage, cauliflower, and herbs, such as Maroi napakpi (Hooker Chives), maroi nakuppi (Chinese chives), nungshhidak (mint) and the like. My father grew cabbages in our Ingkhol.

In winter the caterpillars of the white butterflies, crawled all over our mangol and I used to have an allergic itch from them. If such an ingkhol was large enough it would have a small to medium-sized pond, traditionally on the North-eastern side of the Yumjao.

It was customary to plant tall sanarei (giant marigold) plants near the gate and kaboklei (gardenia) by the ponds. Sanarei plants were also grown by the temples whose gardens were always open. Chini champa (Hari champa) shrubs with fabulous fragrance that had three greenish outer petals and three inner lighter petals, were also planted by the ponds. Leihao (Magnolia champaca) tree with a very dewy orange- yellow flowers with unfurled petals, are favourites among the Meiteis.

The combination of such a few musky flowers in a small bunch, *Leinachom*, was a fashionable hair decoration for women. They usually had it perched between the right or left temple and the pinna of the ear. It was like their signature scent.

Apart from the *Yumjao*, which is a feature that stood out in Imphal, there were a few other landmarks in the town centre. The best one was the Johnstone High English School in its old building by the Khwairamband Bazaar.

The majestic brick-red Johnstone School survived, untouched by the Japanese bombs. It stood like a proud monument for the people of Imphal town, as Trafalgar Square is for Londoners, and Times Square for New Yorkers.

Johnstone School had a walled enclosure with a quadrangle in front of the main building facing south and a gate, connected to the main Kangla-Kangchup road by a short driveway. It was known as school *achouba*, big school to the *hoi polloi*. In the centre of the quadrangle there stood a stone bust of Sir James Johnstone on a tall plinth.

The main Kangla-Kangchup Road divided Awang Dukan (north) and Makha Dukan (south) shopping centres of the Khwairamband Bazaar. Awang Dukan was officially named Maxwell Bazaar, while Makha Dukan as Sadar Bazaar.

There were two rows of wooden cubicles, back-to-back across the main road, which started opposite the Johnstone School Gate and ended by the slip road to the pavilion of the Polo ground (*mapal kangjeibung*). They were called *Nupa Dukan* (Men's shop). Shopkeepers were all men. They sold readymade clothes, vests, leather and canvass shoes, socks, and other items to wear.

The town centre always had a desolate look during the morning hours. In the evening, many women from the outlying villages would come and sell their wares sitting on the ground along the edges of the street in Awang Dukan (Maxwell Bazaar). They sold their home-produced goods, such as a variety of vegetables and fruits, and fish and snails they caught from lakes and rivers. This was the curated customer base where people came to sell or buy daily provisions.

Ima Keithel was also the place where you could go and buy the typical Meitei Khurum- wooden slippers. They were roughly hewn wooden footwear with 3-inch-wide straps made of the lining of disused tyres of lorries. They were made only at Meino Leirak at Sagolband. A pair cost half a rupee.

In the northeast of Maxwell Bazaar there was one Dharmsala (charitable rest house) that was run by Marwaris. Mayang Marwari and Bihari traders used this area of the town centre. Following the Japanlan, a few Sikh refugees from Burma, who came before the war, and who decided to settle in Imphal, had acquired some buildings in the Maxwell Bazaar, and built a Gurdwara nearby.

Large brick-built two-storey buildings of Marwaris, like those in Awang Dukan, lined both sides of the Sadar Bazaar Street, which was paved with concrete. The buildings extended southwards from the main central road up to the Sahib Manai Kabui settlement on the eastern bank of Nambul River. The buildings on the east side of the street were interposed by two cinema Halls, MNB (Manaobi and Nimai Brothers) and Friends Talkies that was owned by Manaobi.

Between the buildings of Sadar Bazaar Street on the west side, there was another cinema Hall, named Victory Cinema Hall. Its owner was Ayekpam Biramangal. Between the cinema Hall and the Nambul River, and close to the Main Road, there was another small bazaar that sold all sorts of things, by both men and women. And nearby on the bank of the

river, south of the Maharani thong, was built a tiny mosque, without the muezzin's calls to the faithful. I used to buy Double Roti after the war. Meiteis would not make it as it contained eggs.

Another landmark of the town centre was the Sanjenthong Bridge across Imphal River and on the road to the Konung (Palace) from the town centre.

Between the Political Agent's Bungalow at Nityaibat chuthek and Sanjenthong, there were the main Post Office and Telegraph Office buildings by the main Road. This road bifurcated before the Sanjenthong Bridge, towards south to Yaiskul and all the way to Moreh.



Old Sanjenthong Bridge.

Along this road, before Yaiskul and on the west side, there was a small Imphal Police Station. The man in-charge before and just after the War, was only an Inspector, known as 'Khomdram IP' (Khomdram Dhana Chandra) from Kwak Keithel (Bazaar).

Such a small number of staff of the constabulary, only showed that crime in Manipur was in short supply. But there were enough convicts in the Imphal Central jail for petty crimes, dressed in white shirts and shorts with broad black stripes, to provide enough free manpower for such jobs as to pull the heavy reinforced concrete roller on the turf of Mapal Kangjeibung.

Opposite to and across from the police station, there were a few other offices, including the office of the DC (Deputy Commissioner). Outside the gates of these offices and by the roadside, sat many professional petition writers on a mat each in a row, with a small wooden box in front of each of them. They were men who went to school but could not pass the Matriculation exams.

Khwairamband Keithel (Bazaar) was not just a marketplace but a meeting place or an esplanade, a relaxing venue for many Imphal men in the evening. They would come there and stroll about for a bit of ‘window-shopping’, just to look at a variety of vegetables and fresh fish. And some would hang on for last minute bargaining, especially for fish.

It was usual for the laissez-faire middle-aged Meitei men from the town, to saunter into the market area, just on the cusp of evening light and darkness, dressed in pristine white dhotis and shirts, and wrapped up in woollen shawls in winter.

They would meet at Ima Keithel. Usually, they would end up having a sit-down on the lawn in a corner of Mapal Kangjeibung near the bazaar. The Kangjeibung was like a city park where they would indulge in idle talk, known as leipung famba (gathering for idle talk). It was a good way to while away the evenings while their wives were preparing the dinner.

Khwairamband Keithel had another attraction. The cinema Halls. Before the Japanlan, the cinema halls screened only Bengali films as Meiteis were fluent in Bengali, which they learnt as medium of instruction in school. During the war, Hindi films replaced Bengali because of the Indian soldiers.

Hindi films from Bombay, became popular after the war when Raj Kapoor glamorised the Hindi film industry in early 1950s, with films like Chori Chori, Awara, Barsat, and others. Dilip Kumar and Dev Anand also

topped the bill. Dilip Kumar's *Shahid* with Kamini Kausal, and Dev Anand's *Baazi* with Geeta Bali were my favourites.



Vendors at Khwairamband bazaar selling winter blankets.

With the coming of Hindi cinema films, a fresh wind of change was blowing among the Meitei youth in penumbras Imphal town. It was palpably in the dress code and hair style. Many schoolboys began to copy the hair style of Dilip Kumar after watching the film *Shaheed* that was screened in 1948. We then had American GI crewcut hair style.



Author & Margaret with Dev Anand in his Bungalow at Juhu, Bombay.

I followed Dev Anand in his dress style and mannerisms, with various knitted sweaters and bomber jackets of corduroy and suede leather. I followed his style only after watching him in the film *Bazi*, starring with

Geeta Bali in 1951. Many years later, my hero became a friend in Bombay.

Among the Meitei girls, the most innovative and daring fashion change came with the students of Tamphasana Girls' High School. They opted out of the ancient Moirang Thoibi hair style (cf. elsewhere). They chose the sleek combed back trendy hairstyle as they saw it in Hindi films.

Curiously, with the same bashfulness in speaking English like the boys, those schoolgirls were also shy of wearing shoes. They felt they would be seen as highflying and pretentious. Only those who went to college, wore shoes.

The oldest landmark in Imphal town was the Mapal Kangjeibung (Outer polo ground). It was very ancient. It was bounded by the main Kangla-Kangchup road in the north and was at a lower level of about 60 cm below the road surface. It had no fencing. Manipuri polo has been played on this ground from time beyond memory and to date. This ground was not created by the British. It is a national heritage.



Modern Straight hair of the late Irengbam Gita Devi (Right) at her Function for the Disabled in Imphal.

The polo ground was in the British Reserve, where the British loved playing polo. Christopher Gimson, the Political Agent during this period

I am talking about, kept it well-maintained. He often played golf on the Polo ground.

He kept the turf in the polo ground in perfect condition. He had the grass regularly mowed, rolled, watered, and fed with grass food regularly, using the convicts from the Imphal Central Jail. The ground was free for the people of Imphal to enjoy as a park and for playing games like hockey and football or any indigenous sports.

On Sunday afternoons in winter, mapal Kangjeibung provided entertainment for the men folk of Imphal. There were regular polo games. The matches were played between two Meitei panas (arbitrary districts of Manipur) of which there were four in number: Naharup, Ahallup, Khabam and Laipham.

There were one or two sahibs on each side, wearing breeches and knee-high boots and donning solar hats to protect their heads in case of a fall off the horse. The small pavilion on the west side, was always full of other sahibs and Meitei elite. Sometimes, Mem sahibs and their children (Chhota sahibs) were also present. My father was often a guest there.

In the summer months the Polo ground was quiet and desolate. The pavilion was small. It was walled at the back with two small windows, but open on all three sides except for 1-metre-high wooden railings, which were interrupted in front to accommodate a few steps down to the ground, and another smaller one on the south side.

The pavilion was accessed by a slip road from the main Kangla-Kangchup road. Between this slip road and the Thakurbari buildings there were two large ponds that were for exclusive use of these Marwari families.



Civil Hospital Male Ward. Author (2nd from left) with the union Health minister from Delhi, 1964.

Another prominent feature of Imphal was the Civil Hospital that was located opposite the Polo ground on the north side of the main road. It had 80 beds (cf. Parts 12&13). It used to have a British Civil Surgeon. It had a male ward and a female ward with a small building in the middle, as the operating theatre, known in Manipuri as Thang thabam.

It is amazing how the simplicity of living in Imphal, made the daily grind of life a pleasure to endure.

