

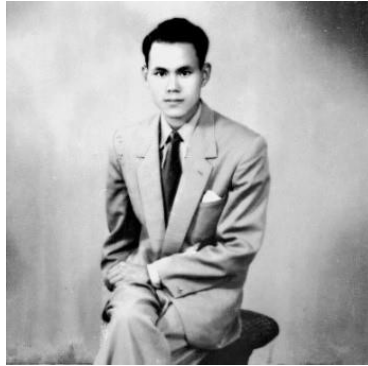


Engelei

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Part 10

Home Lighting and Imphal Town



Author in Delhi 1953.

This is about the end of December 2020. The second national lockdown with the Corona virus began in November 2020 in England. The pandemic is now at the most threatening state. Further measures include staying at home, not meeting indoors with anyone from a different household, ban on weddings and avoiding travelling in and out of one's local area.

It has brought many cities around the world to a grinding halt. It feels like time has come to a standstill and the earth has stopping revolving. Italy was the first country in Europe to go into full lockdown on March 10, 2020. It was followed by Spain and France, and then Britain on March 26. By the end of March, half the world's population was locked

down with Covid-19 virus.

It is like HG Well's science fiction, *The War of the Worlds*, which I saw in a movie in 1953. There is panic of invasion by an alien virus group with evidence of social Darwinism that people all over the world are subject to the same Darwinian laws of natural selection and survival. It also shows that having faith in any religion is no panacea. They all die all the same.

The world has come to almost a standstill. No passenger flights anywhere. All the trains run three quarters empty. Nobody goes to work in offices. All the schools are closed. Hospitals admit only emergencies and patients ill with Covid. Many people on the hospital waiting lists for treatment, such as for cancer die at home. Many elderly people in Old People's Homes, die without medical attention and without seeing their near and dear ones.

The lockdown sparked a shift in minimalist living, a lifestyle with essentials. Many people including me and my wife were led to embrace a simple way of life. This simple uncluttered aesthetic of minimalism made me think about Mahatma Gandhi, and Meitei way of life before and just after WWII, in tandem.

Manipur was like *Timbuctoo* in the 17th century, unexplored by European explorers. But Meiteis, despite their isolation, were not exactly like Inuit of Etah (about 700 miles from the North Pole), also known as Arctic Highlanders. They believed they were the only people on the earth, because of their great isolation, until they met the first European explorers.

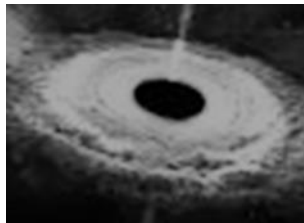
Etah was used by various explorers to explore the North Pole during the Great Age of exploration in the 1400 - 1600s. The North Pole has no land mass. It is all ice that is floating on top of the Arctic Ocean. The South Pole on the other hand, has a landmass, which is covered with ice up to

4 km thick.

Meiteis were quite civilised people. But they lived a minimalist life, but not in the true sense of the term. Minimalism is a life choice and not because of poor income households. Meiteis were poor but they had the art of keeping it tidy while being poor in the way modern minimalists do. Yet minimalism is hardly a new phenomenon. It's been around for centuries under various names. Meiteis lived in a lifestyle that approached minimalism.

It is a pure unalloyed pleasure to remember Imphal in 1940s, just outside the British Reserve in a midsummer's night, on a full moon day. The British Reserve was the town centre, and it was brightly lit up by electrical lamps from tubular electrical iron poles.

The full moon or the entire visible face of the moon, illuminated by the Sun, is known as *Purnima* in Sanskrit. As the sun disappeared beneath the horizon after delivering the last rays of joyful sunshine, the rest of the Imphal town became a distressing void, covered with pitch darkness which was blacker than black.



Black Hole. (Photo credit: National Geography).

In the deafening silence when you could hear a pin drop, and as the full moon began to rise, the dark sky brightened up with moonglow with a few low-ribbed clouds gleaning faintly with swords of shimmering moon light. With hindsight, I would imagine the darkness I experienced then, must be like the Black Hole – a region in space where the gravity pull is so great that even light cannot escape.

About twelve years later, now as a young man in Delhi and as late as 1953, I was amazed how poorly lit was the vast area of Delhi. It was seemingly untrue. I had by then, been to Calcutta and Bombay in the glare of electricity throughout the night.

Calcutta was the city where the first electric lighting in India was available in 1879, followed by Bombay in 1905 for the tramcars. Bangalore city, where the British stationed their garrison, because of the pleasant climate, was the first to have streetlight installed in August 1905. Before the arrival of electricity kerosene lamps dotted Bangalore's roads.

Delhi also had its electricity in 1905, but only for a very small area, supplied by a private English company called M/S John Fleming, from a diesel engine set at Lahori Gate in Old Delhi. It was only after 1958 that the distribution of electricity to all areas of Delhi came about.

So, when I went to Delhi in late 1953, I noticed that Imphal was not alone that was bereft. I was heartened that Imphal was not after all, a wretched town. It beggars belief that all the grandeur you can see now in New Delhi was non-existent in 1953.

New Delhi in the early 1950s, was an enormous terrain, covered with an abundance of thorny kikar (acacia) trees (*chigongleie pambi* in Manipuri) – branches of which were used as Indian national toothbrush (*Daton*). It was inhabited by jackals and wild pigs.

I remember Talkatora Gardens, the old Mughal Garden that was cleared of acacia trees to accommodate delegates from all the states of India, for the Republic Day celebration in 1955, long before a stadium was built there. I went there to meet my brother Gokulchandra, who led the Manipur contingent.

New Delhi as the capital of India was mostly in the dark. Only the House

of the Viceroy (now Rashtrapati Bhavan), the Secretariat (now Houses of Parliament), the India Gate, Kingsway (now Rajpath), the upmarket circular Connaught Place with its shopping malls and posh air-conditioned restaurants, were lit up.

The New Delhi Railway Station, 1 km from Connaught Place between Ajmer Gate and Paharganj, was also illuminated. The Karol Bagh area that sprung up with Punjabi refugees after the 1947 Partition was also lit up with street lighting.

The history of Delhi as the Capital of ancient India, relates mostly to the older part of Delhi with a rich tapestry from the bygone era of the Moghuls and beyond, such as the ancient Indraprastha, the capital of the Pandavs in the Mahabharata. The Mughal emperor Humayun built the Purana Qila in 1538 and before him, Qutubuddin Aibak (1206-1210 CE) with Qutub Minar fame, made Delhi his capital.

Old Delhi is famed with the Red Fort, Chandni Chowk, Jama Masjid, Humayun's Tomb, Lodhi Gardens, and others. The Old Delhi was called Shahajanabad in older days, as it was built by Shah Jahan, the 5th Mughal emperor.

Legend had it that the placename 'Delhi' was coined in the 1st century BCE, from Raja Dhilu, who built a city near the site where centuries later, the Qutub Minar Tower was Built. Not only had the Mughals (Turkish-Mongol origin), made Delhi their capital since 1526, but other Muslim dynasties who came to India made Delhi their capital before the Mughals. Among them Sikandar Lodhi of the Lodhi dynasty created Delhi Sultanate in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Before them, the Turko-Indian sultanate (1320-1413), founded by Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq in the 14th century made Delhi its capital at Tughluqabad in (Tughluqabad Fort in New Delhi).

My favourite place is the Lodhi Gardens, which made me think of how these Muslim conquerors brought their own civilisation to India. When Prophet Mohammed died on June 8 632 CE, he left as his legacy one of the fastest growing religions of the millennium, creating a network of geographical regions, united by a single faith, known as the Dar al-Islam or 'Home of Islam'.

Early Mughals spoke the *Chagatai* language and transferred the Persian literary and high culture to India, Hindu missionaries who came from India, brought Hindu religion and culture to Manipur in early 18th century. Gradually, Hinduism became woven into the very fabric of Meitei civilisation (1717).



Lodhi Gardens in Delhi.

British India changed its capital from Calcutta to Delhi on December 12, 1911. New Delhi was built in 1920 amid the rubble of seven previous cities in the same area, such as the Delhi Sultanate of Lodhi (Afghan) dynasty that ruled Delhi from 1451-1526 CE. The name 'New Delhi' was given by King George V on December 31, 1926.

There were no high-rise buildings in Delhi in the 1950s. Karol Bagh was like Khwairamband Bazaar in Imphal. New Delhi had only a few densely packed, substandard and dilapidated hutments around the Gold Market area, to accommodate thousands of employees, who were brought from different parts of India to work for the government, at the Civil Lines and the Old secretariat, now Delhi Legislative Assembly in Old

Delhi, where Delhi University is located.

Knowing how Delhi was in the 1950s where it was rare to see a car except for diplomatic cars bearing number plates in blue with initials CD (Diplomatic Corps) it is not surprising in comparison, that people in Imphal had poor lighting in their homes in early 1940s.

I have written in an earlier chapter that women vendors at Ima Keithel used to burn pine sticks that produced a fragrant aroma, for light when darkness closed in, and daylight eked out. Many less well-off homes in Imphal, used pine sticks for lighting at night.

Not since my childhood experience of lighting with a *podon* in the house next door in 1941, have I stopped to think what a wonderful world it is to see everything bathed in the brilliance of electric lamps at night, as in Calcutta and Bombay.

It is quite weird- to relive those days in Imphal before lanterns fuelled by kerosene became available in many homes. I can remember when electricity was installed in our home in my childhood.

Initially, tiny metal lamps, known as *podon*, fuelled by kerosene (Tersing in Manipuri) was the main source of lighting homes in Imphal. It was 'luxury lighting' for some families that could only afford to illuminate the house by burning strips of pine wood.

Anthropologists tell us how the *Homo sapiens* began to invent fire and illuminate the caves in the dark. The exact timing of the use of fire for warmth and lighting by cave men has been a subject of debate. Some scientists claim that they have found evidence in the 'microscopic traces of wood ash' from controlled fire by *Homo erectus* in Africa, long before *Homo sapiens*, dating back a million or so years. The pre-historic or cave men are believed to have used fire for warmth and light inside their caves.

Even in science-oriented Europe, before the 18th century, night-time activities were rare. In such an event, they used torches using vegetable, and animal fats, the like of which we often see in movies. It was followed in 18th century, by candles made of beeswax or animal fat. Then, they progressed to using oil from animals like whales or fish. Kerosene lamps appeared in Europe in mid-19th century.

In Imphal in early 20th century, kerosene lamps became available when some Marwari traders from Assam, came to settle in Imphal for small business enterprises. One of them, the Bakliwal family became an agent for the supply of red kerosene and petrol from the Burma Oil Company. A petrol filling station was established opposite the North Gate of Kangla by the Indo-Burma Road, known as BOC.

Most households in Imphal, began to use small circular kerosene lamps known as 'Podon'. It has kerosene inside a tightly enclosed round shaped tin container, about 7-8 cm in diameter and about 5 cm tall. They were made with a central upright tubular snout of about 4x1cm, which was removable from the kerosene containing base.

Through the snout, a rounded cotton wick came up, which burnt the kerosene inside. The wick could be pulled up or down above the snout, to control the intensity of the light. The longer the lighter, the shorter the less light. There were many households that could not afford these 'sophisticated lamps' at that time. They used little pine sticks as mentioned earlier.

A few years later, tall free-standing kerosene fuelled lanterns known as laltel in Meiteilon, were introduced in Imphal. They were hurricane lanterns with kerosene oil-lit flat wicks, surrounded by chimney glasses that sat on rounded oil container bases. The top and bottom parts of the lamp had perforated metal surrounds for air circulation and to control the flame.

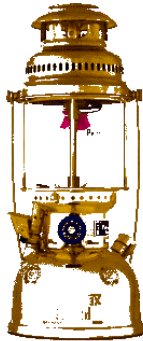


Kerosene lamp podon.



Hurricane lantern (Laltel).

The wick could be adjusted using a metal ring at the base. Each lamp had a metal wire handle on top, with which it could be hung up or carried around. Much later, medium sized freestanding pressure-generated kerosene lamps called half-lamps, and hanging ones, known as Petromax (named after the nick name of the inventor) with glass globes facing downwards, became available.



Standing Petrolmax.



Hanging Petrolmax

These lamps had a mantle instead of a wick. Mantle is an impregnated fabric with chemicals to give white bright light when heated with a flame. It was fitted like a string purse, and it had a lifespan. An in-built hand pump pressurised the air, which forced the liquid kerosene from a tank at the bottom to a carburettor higher up, which vaporised the liquid, and mixed it with air.

The mixed air and gas from a tube burned and heated the mantle to

glow and produced heat. They were very expensive, and only a few people owned them. They were used mostly for public functions like weddings, and religious festivals like Lai Harauba and Durga Puja. They were lent out free of cost by the owner to the neighbourhood, even after electricity came to Imphal in the late 1930s.

Among the various festivals in Imphal, I have chosen two at random for effect and for record, to show how Meiteis in the post war years, enjoyed their religious festivities, not all as devout but many with utter parafunctions. Just going through the motions.

When electric lighting became available in Imphal in the late 1930s, many households could not afford it on one hand, and on the other the hydro-electric plant was small, generating only 100kw of electricity. But it was available for some public functions such as weddings and religious festivals on application to the authority.

The bright light of electricity in Imphal, helped to increase the values of religious rituals as better visual of religious symbolism enhanced spiritual awakening. It also enlivened the aesthetics – the emotional impact of the function. It was indeed a fortiori for Durga Puja festivals when the cool blue-white linear fluorescent tube lighting was available in the market in Imphal in 1948. The radiance given by electric lighting became a game changer in crowd pulling at such functions. The bright light transformed the outdoor night-time environment.

Lai Harauba is an indigenous Meitei ritual. It has been celebrated from times out of mind as an infusion of ancient Meitei culture, a retelling of Meitei creation myth. It is the same myth as the creation of Adam and Eve in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, which liberal theology now, assumes as a poetic work.

Lai Harauba symbolically reflects a vintage appeal of the primal Meitei belief system with its own symbolism and cosmology and with slight

variations among the salais. I will come to this later (cf. Part 14).



Lai Harauba Festival in Manipur. Po-faced Maibis dancing to the tune of penakhongba.

Durga Puja, a Hindu festival in which I had a lot of fun from about the age of 7 or 8, is also mythological. It has been celebrated all over India, dating back its origin in Bengal in 1583. It is the biggest Hindu festival in Bengal and more so in Calcutta.

It is like the festivity of Diwali in north India and Ningol Chakkouba in Imphal (not religious). Unlike Lai Harauba it is a riveting collision of uproarious high spirit of the revellers and the dark distress of goddess Kalimai.

In a sense, it is also like Lai Harauba, as much a social event as a religious one. This involves the worship of goddess Durga. She symbolises power and triumph of good over evil. It is a ten-day event in the Hindu month of Ashwin (September-October). It is an autumnal ritual.

In Manipur, the Meiteis having been initiated into Hinduism in 1717, they grasped the veneer of Hindu philosophy and mythology with an amazing speed from Meitei story tellers and Puja-performing Brahmins. Then, they forged their new rituals to accommodate the old cultural rite of Lai Harauba, without any scruple, in a way that, their living past would give meaning not only to the present but also to the future.



Image of Durga dressed in Manipuri phanek. A god or goddess is what you imagine to be. All in the mind.

In Imphal, in the late 1940s, Durga Puja was celebrated with fanfare and solemnity in the glare of electrical lights for five days of festive bonhomie. It was held in the Manipuri month of Mera (September-October) at various garishly coloured mandab and in temporarily erected huts by the roadsides.

The most colourful one I knew, was by the Maharani Bridge-end of Uripok, by the roadside, with lots of people exulting in the thunder and tumult of the occasion. Hindi film love songs and devotional hymns metallicly erupted out of loudspeakers during the day, and a lot of fireworks went off at night, while erratic explosions in the sky lit up the darkness, sending sprays of myriad psychedelic aerial displays.

Most children in Imphal, including me, celebrated it at home. The prime excitement was the decoration of the small Durga house about 1.2m x 0.5m, with various coloured tissue papers that were cut into strips with a string and stuck with glue to the small hut. A vibrant tapestry of pretty paper flowers, all enriched with colour and flamboyance, were the trademark

A colour poster picture of Durga in her martial form with her eight arms, destroying the demon Mahishasura in the form of a buffalo, was

installed inside. Towards the end of the Puja, called Dussehra, there were animal sacrifices, such as at Kalighat Temple in South Calcutta and at Kangla cantonment in Imphal. As Meiteis were pescatarians, we sacrificed a *turbot* (ash gourd) to appease the goddess. It didn't mean anything to me. I was just going through the rituals.

In the Kangla cantonment in Imphal, sacrifice of animals (*Bali katpa* in Manipuri) was an annual event for the Gurkhas during the Durga puja. *Kalimai* (Black Mother), a militant form of Durga in its dark hue with a red protruding tongue and multiple arms, as the goddess of war or power (Shakti), was venerated by the Gurkhas. They celebrated Durga Puja every year at their parade ground.

The main event was the sacrifice of buffaloes to propitiate Kalimai on the day of Dussehra. When I was a little boy, my father as an invited guest, along with some British officers, took me to watch it. A buffalo was led out by a rope around its neck and tied to a decorated wooden pole.

It came happily enough, but the ones after it, seemed to have sensed that they were about to lose their heads. Perhaps, they felt it instinctively with the smell of the blood shed by the previous animal from their herd, though it was immediately covered with sand. They had to be forced to come there.

Near the wooden pole, a section of 7 Gurkha Riflemen holding their 303 rifles on their right shoulders stood. A priest held a long sword in both his hands. The sword was broadened and curved with its foible edge forward. As the priest struck the neck of the buffalo, the riflemen would fire a single ceremonial volley.

The body of the animal would slump and wriggle without its head, when four riflemen would grab the hind legs, two on each side and drag the carcass around the pole a few times until it stopped writhing. Further

sacrifices of goats and chicken followed by individual Gurkhas.

The Gurkha battalion of the 4th Assam Rifles replaced the 44th Gurkha Rifles that was originally stationed at Langthabal as bodyguards of the political Agent. It had a unit each, stationed at Ukhrul, Tamenglong and Churachandpur, to fly the British flag.

When I was a small boy, it was a pageant once a month, to watch a column of Gurkhas marching to a light infantry quick step, down Uripok Road from Tamenglong, led by their military band playing bag pipes and beating side-drums and big drums. The big drummers always wore tiger skins. At the approaching sound of drumbeats, men, women and children from both sides of Uripok Road would rush to the roadside to see the spectacle.

Durga puja celebration is also called Navaratri (9 nights) and 10 days is celebrated all over India. It is also called Dussehra (taken ten sins away) in North India. It is called Durga Puja in Bengal and Manipur. The celebration is for the victory of Rama against Ravana in the Ramayana epic. Effigies of Ravana are burnt on this 10th day of Dussehra in North India as in the Ram Lila ground in Delhi. Emblematically, this also is the festival to mark the victory of goddess Durga in her battle against the demon Mahishasura.



Margaret, Neil, author & temple Pundit. Meenakshi Temple complex.
Madurai, Tamil Naidu. November 2009.

My wife, son and I visited the famous Meenakshi Temple in Madurai in South India on the evening of Navaratri, as a guest of the Chairman of the Temple Board. It is a huge complex and a beautiful temple constructed in the Dravidian architecture.

We saw a big procession through the long hall of numerous sculptured pillars inside the temple, where the followers took the idol of Shiva from his quarter in the temple, to join his consort Parvati (another name for Durga in Skanda Purana) in another quarter, for him to spend the night with her.

Parvati, as the consort of Shiva and archetypal mother goddess, assumed the form of a warrior-goddess to defeat a demon who assumed the form of a buffalo. Meenakshi in Tamil means “fish eyed” or beautiful eyes. Her statue is of greenish tint, indicating her dusky Dravidian origin.

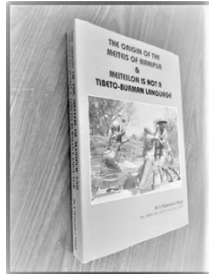
I was told that 20,000 people visit the temple every day. It is a very sacred place to Hindus all over the world. Unlike Jagannath Temple in Odisha, non-Hindus like my wife were allowed inside the temple, though not at the sanctum sanctorum where my son and I had the blessings from a Brahmin purohit.

Hinduism is believed to have been introduced to India by the invading/migrating Aryans from Central Asia. There is, however, a raging debate now whether the so-called Aryans ever came to India at all.

I have also been debating the question of whether Meitei ancestors ever came to Manipur from Southeast Asia and that Meiteilon is not a Tibeto-Burman language ((cf. The Origin of Meiteis & Meiteilon is not a Tibeto-Burman language, 2009).

For and against Aryan migration, there are two opposite theories. The first: the Indus valley people, connected with the Indus Valley

civilisation, are the indigenous people of India and they moved to the Gangetic plain when the Indus valley was devastated by a flash flood. They cite the discovery of a seal that is identified as an early prototype of the Hindu god Shiva.



The Origin of Meiteis & Meiteilon is not Tibeto-Burman language.

The second: The Aryan people from central Asia migrated to the Gangetic valley around 2,000–1,500 BCE when the Indus valley Civilisation came to an end. The Aryan migration (invasion) theory was first advanced by Western scholars during the colonial era.

The anti-migration supporters argue that the Aryan migration is a hoax. A European supremacy to show their great influence in Indian civilisation. They say there is no historical, archaeological, or anthropological evidence to support the migration, though there is a large recent debate about a controversial genetic finding of a skeleton of a woman, 4-5 million years old, buried in Rakhigarhi, the largest Indus Valley civilisation site in Haryana.

For Meitei origin on the other hand, I claim that there is nothing at all to substantiate the wild guess work, which really was just a remark or two by a couple of British ethnologists about 200 years ago. It is best forgotten. With reference to the nature of Meitei language, I am very glad that the truth has now come out.

Some linguistic scholars are coming round to supporting my hypothesis.

I read the speech of the Governor of Manipur, La Ganesan, who for the first time by anybody, accepted the controversy of the nature of Meiteilon (Manipuri). It was on the 12th Manipur State Awards for literature distribution function in Imphal, on November 19, 2021.

His speech was non-committal. He said: "Though some scholars contested the classification of Manipuri language as Tibeto-Burmese, most accepted the classification of Grierson in the Linguistic Survey of India, published in 1898." This was the first time a bureaucrat resisted from saying emphatically that 'Meiteilon is a Tibeto-Burman language'.

By chance, I also found a write up by **Chungkham Yashwanta** Singh, professor of Linguistics with speciality in Tibeto-Burman languages at Manipur University, in the book, *The Other Manipur*, Edited by H Dwijasekhar Sharma, 2013, Vol 3 Pp 657-696: 6). I would like to thank my contemporary Dwijasekhar, who kindly gave me volumes of this book.

Yashwanta wrote: "But **Prof Matisoff** has recently done a reconstruction of the Tibeto-Burman language to find a proto-Tibetan-Burman language. In this widely accepted classification, **he has left Meiteilon outside of Tibeto-Burman language family**. It will be noted that the Meiteilon is declassified and is no more a Tibeto-Burman language, as previously assumed."

I will take this sporadic moment for self-gratification that, after 12 years In which I as a non-expert, argued that Meiteilon is not a Tibeto-Burman language, a top linguist in the world, has come to agree with my view (cf. *The Origins of Meiteis & Meiteilon is not a Tibeto-Burman Language*. 2009, pp 1-56).

I think, therefore I am (Cogito, ergo sum).

