



Engelei

178

Part 11

Fashion Revolution for Meiteis



Author in 1955 in Nainital.

Nainital in the Kumaon Hills is the central section of the Himalayas in the north. It is one of the most captivating hill stations in India. Naini Tal or Naini Lake with Naini Temple at the far end, has two sections, Malital (Higher) and Talital (lower). They are connected by the British boulevard signature – The Mall Road (now, Govinda Ballabh Pant Marg), where there is no vehicular traffic. Nainital is one of the most visited lakes in India. It had its leitmotif song in Kumauni language:

Nainital ghumne ayorela, akhan name kajlisho bubule tail ner sheila...

I have come to tour Nainital with mascara in my eyes and applying oil on my hair.

The beautiful lake beckons to you the moment you alight on its shore

from a bus that brings you from Kathgodam, the railhead for Nainital. When I first arrived there in August 1955 for the first time, from the hot and sweaty Delhi, it was like heaven on earth.



The late RK Sanatombi (Ex-Judge), who had just done his BA exam from Calcutta, came to see me in Nainital on holiday in 1955.

But nothing is like home, sweet home, where our loved ones are. Coming back home from Nainital to Imphal during the holidays, it was always 'sweet dreams guaranteed.' Imphal town is an old historical town that came into existence after beginning of the Common Era. It had its own magical charm.



Revisiting Nainital in 1990 with my friend Dev Dutt Puri.

It has history of mystery that is surreal and sublime. It is simply stunning like the magic in the *Wizard of Oz*, which is thematic of self-sufficiency, companionship and friendliness. It is the culture, which is deeply rooted and often in unconscious norms, traditions, and the way of life, which gave me a sense of comfort and belonging. After a few days in Imphal I became part of Meitei history. Never mind the heavenly Nainital.

There was nothing like Meitei culture elsewhere, with our shared values, beliefs, opinions, and the like. I was wearing suit and tie all day while I was studying in Darjeeling, eating English-style cuisine, speaking English language, and singing English songs. I was living though much less, in the same style while studying at Nainital. But back home, wearing occasionally, a traditional *khudei* and a vest, was quite comfortable and relaxing, as norms of my culture.

The Loktak Lake at Moirang often rekindled my memory of Naini Lake except the premise that Loktak was a remnant of the vast lake that once filled the valley of Manipur or Imphal valley.

Manipur was raised from the bottom of the sea many millennia ago. Manipur is in the eastern band of the Himalayas, which was uplifted from the bottom of the sea, when the north-moving Indo-Asian tectonic plate collided with the Eurasian tectonic plate, fifty million years ago (cf. author's book, *Points to Ponder, How was Kangleipak raised from the bottom of the sea*, pp 45-47).

We know that the Himalayan Mountain range began to form between 40 and 50 million years ago, when two large landmasses (tectonic plates) India and Eurasia, driven by plate movement, collided. As both plates were of the same density one plate could not be subducted. The pressure was only released by thrusting a great mass skyward, which formed the Himalayan Mountain range. Himalayas or Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) is still elevating by 1 cm every year as the two plates continue to move against each other.

The average elevation of Imphal valley is now 2,590ft (790m). The Imphal valley is also rising from the figure 2,500ft (762m), if I correctly remember the school geography books, while I was at class V in 1946. The average elevation, if the above figures are correct, has now grown up by 28m from 762 to 790m in 80 years. Which is 0.35cm every year.

The finding of fossils of sea living creatures in the Himalayan peaks, as well as in Manipur like the cuttlefish at Kangpokpi in north Manipur, bears authenticity to the theory. The elevation of the Imphal plateaux is due partly to the uplift from the sea, and partly from sedimentation from flooding rivers.



Cuttlefish (Size range 15-25 cm), A great Chinese dish.

Many geologists agree with our oral history that Imphal valley was once filled with water in the beginning. Meiteis believe that the water was drained over the millennia through the naturally occurring Chingnughut tunnels and the Imphal valley became a lacustrine plain formed by siltation of this large ancient lake.

Loktak pat is the largest remnant, while others like Lamphel pat, Charang pat, porompat, Kekru pat, Loui pat, Waithou pat, pumlun pat and so on remained as lakes during the wet seasons. These Lakes also bear testimony to the origin of Manipur from the bottom of the sea.

As of this month of December 2020, the Himalayas continues to be elevated and Mt Everest has gone taller by a metre. Mt Everest was named after Sir George Everest, British surveyor General of India

(1830-1843). As an upside of the Covid virus lockdown and the lack of atmospheric pollution, the people of Jalandhar in Punjab, can now see snow-peaked Himalayas, about 200 km away.

Because it is a raised plateau, the climate in Manipur before the global warming, was always pleasant. It was partly because of the climate that, Manipur was once described as “A little paradise on earth” by a British Army Matron in 1942.

It is this paradisiacal climate that fashions Meitei dress. Of which I will talk about very briefly. Meitei dress is sustainable and ethical. They are simple and economical. They hardly contribute to anything to the 10% greenhouse gas emission that is responsible by the world fashion industry.

Climate dependent fabric that are locally available and dress style transform Meitei dress fashion. A biography of Meitei clothes shows their relationship to their lives. And fashion operates within and in relation to the socio-economic life of Meitei people.

Aesthetic impression of fashion is shaped by shifting landscapes of time and place, as we will see in the fashion change of Meitei women. In general, climate affect the way people dress. Climate and geography determine the type of clothes people wear.

A personal reflection on the fashion revolution among the children in Imphal in the post-World War II will be highlighted in this chapter. Fashion is a potent visual marker of our times. It is self-expression. It might help if I were to explain the difference between style and fashion. They do overlap. Commonly, style relates to individuals while fashion is more collective.

The post war change in the Meitei women’s sartorial fashion was remarkable because of the limited choices they had in their repertoire.

They were not exactly Marie Antoinette who led the Rococo fashion – 18th century European women's fashion characterised by plentiful but light material with ornamentation. Meitei women's fashion was skimpy. Since ancient times, Meitei women who took part in fashion, usually chose a moderate but statistically relevant fashion either as a consumer or a working bee.

Fashion trends in dressing among Meitei women were socio-culturally grounded as a specific expression of that specific time in Imphal. They had Meitei characteristics. They reflected Meitei culture. Changes in fashion in the early 1950s, were ruminations of their modern worldview.

The Meitei girls felt that there was room for rebellion. And they did so at the end of WWII. They ushered in the idea of modernity in their attire. The prevailing fashion in their apparel, coiffure and jewellery were characteristic of the period.

The girls fashioned themselves by wearing dresses that outlined their feminine figure better. They discarded the old-fashioned coy dressing. It was even more fabulous as Imphal did not have a fashion industry that set trends in fashion and style.

The change in fashion was especial as they had only one piece of apparel. It was the *phanek*, especially the '*Phanek Mapal Naiba*', which continued to indicate who they were and identified their nationality. It epitomised a sustainable Meitei culture – 'the social skin' as some anthropologist called it.

The phanek was simply simple. A wrap-around sheet of home-made cotton or silk fabric, which went one and half times over their bust and tucked in under the left armpit. It was tight-fitting and reached down just below the calf. They left the top bare, which was covered at times for modesty and style by an 'innafi' – a thin rectangular cotton shawl usually white with a coloured border. In winter, a woollen plane shawl

of various colours with or without embroidered borders was used as wrapper on top of the innafi.

Phanek for young children, was worn around their waist, leaving the top uncovered (*phanek khoidom setpa*) as memorialised by this bit of artistic and literary Meitei oral literature:

**phanek khoidom setlingei, kumlangna nada chiilingei,
hainakhiba wadubu kaubirabara nungshibi [...]**

In English: don't you remember my love, the promise we made to each other, when you were wearing your phanek around your waist and had black thread in your pierced ears?

In the mid-teens, the girls began to wear their phanek wrapped around their bust. Broadly speaking, there were two kinds of phanek: informal and formal. The informal or daily wear was of several colours except black.

A particular colour known as *thambal machu* (lotus-pink colour) was the favourite for Ngangbi Maharani, the wife of Churachand Maharaj. It was forbidden for anybody to wear except herself. For religious functions and mourning they dressed in *pongou phanek* (faint peach colour).

The informal phanek was of light weight while the formal one was heavy. They were woven on the waist looms in half the width and the right length. The two 'halves' were stitched together lengthways by hand to make a whole phanek dress.

The final influence on dressing was simple economics. Meitei women were fully aware of it. They spent less percentage of money on their clothing. The formal wear was called 'Phanek Mapal Naiba' - Phanek with borders. When worn, the two edges of the bottom part of it, were stitched up for about 6-7 cm so as not to be blown open by the wind. It

was striped running horizontally and was of assorted colours. It had a broad margin of about 12 cm at the top and bottom. There were sets of geometrical figures that were embroidered on them by hand, using a needle and floss silk (home-made rough silk).



Margaret wearing Phanek Mapalnaiba in Imphal

The expensive ones were made of silk, known as ‘Phige phanek,’ which were worn on special social occasions. Some women wore a short velvet jacket, small green Zouave jacket (*ashangba resham phurit*) in winter for formal functions. The phurit reached down mid-rib and had two long sleeves. In winter, women like men, had woollen shawls to wrap around.

Meitei women walked bare foot. Women of royalty wore *khongup* (slippers) for formal occasions. The slippers had padded soles and the tops were made of velvet of assorted colours.

Among Meitei women’s fashion, one that was hauntingly elegant was their wedding dress. A wedding ceremony was an emotional time in a girl’s life. This sentimental part of a Meitei girl’s wedding was matched by her wedding dress of *potloi* that was calm, collected, and cool. The ‘potloi’ was graceful as the bride moved with determined stolid steps as she circled seven times round the bridegroom who was seated with an

equally dismal toned-down face.

Since all weddings were arranged in those days unlike these days, apart from a few who eloped, there was a lot of sadness on the part of the bride as she was to leave her parents' home and carefree childhood days for a strange household. There was something particularly doleful and absorbing about the spectacle. My father always wept at the wedding of his daughters.



Wedding potloi. Manju Leishangthem married to my grandson Narendra.

The bride was always drawn to that kind of intensity of emotions - a natural grief, signifying her apprehension about her departure to the groom's house. Ironically, when she came home for '*Mapam Chakkouba*' (customary lunch at parents' home) after five days, she always was in a hurry to return to her husband's home because of the newly acquired marital bliss.

Potloi as a wedding dress was adopted from the costume of girl artists in the Ras Lila, which was introduced by Maharaja Bhagyachandra in the mid-18th century. During his reign, Gauria Dharma or Chaitanya Vaishnavism reached its high point. Bhagyachandra was reputed to have

introduced the potloi costume for Ras Lila, in imitation of *Ghaghara*, a dress costume of the women of Brindaban. Prior to this period, the brides wore phanek and innafi at weddings.

Ras Lila, literal meaning 'Juicy play,' is a play of aesthetic flavour in Vaishnavism. Allegorically, it depicts the love dance or dance of divine love of Krishnan for Radha and Gopis (cowherd women). In the legend, they often danced in Madhuvan or Madhu Forest in Brindavan.

It is a classical dance of northern India. It narrates various stories of the life of young Krishna in Brindavan, with their hand movements, foot work and flexible body manoeuvres. It evolved during the *bhakti* movement, between the 15th and 17th centuries.

In Manipur, the dance had been transformed into Meitei culture with Meitei-fashioned attire both for Krishna and the women. So, the fashion and design of the 'potloi' itself had evolved over the years. It had been an ankle-deep floppy skirt with embroidery of certain designs. The modern one is, cylindrical and very ornate.

The potloi costume of Ras Lila has two parts: (1) potloi – the main body and the other (2) *poswan*, the pleated white top accessory. The wedding potloi has no *poswan*, which symbolises a married woman like Radha and Gopis of Brindavan. Ras Lila, as the legendary love story of Radha and Krishna, became more popular after the Odisha poet Jayadeva Goswami authored his epic poem *Git Govinda* (Song of Cowherd. Govinda, another name of Krishna) on palm leaves in the 12th century (cf. Episode 4).

Git Govinda has twelve chapters. It has sections. In the first section or canto, poet Jayadeva writes about the incarnations of Vishnu, known as Dashavatar. This verse, "Om Jai Jagadish Hare..." is popularly sung at Vishnu (Krishna) temples by the entire congregation at the time of Aarti ceremony. When I was a little boy, Meiteis used to sing it during the

Kangchingba (Rath Yatra) festival. I still remember it as I learnt it then, while accompanying my father at such gatherings at a local temple mandab. The first verse of this Vaishnava hymn:

**praya-payodhi-jale, dhritavan asi vedam,
vhita-vahita- cartiram akhedam,
keshava dhrta-mina sarira, jaya jagadish hare.**

In English. O Keshava! O Lord of the universe! O Lord Hari, who have assumed the form of a fish! All glories to You! You easily functioned as A boat in the form of a giant fish just to give protection to the Vedas, which had become immersed in the turbulent sea of devastation.

Git Govinda has made Radha immensely popular as Krishna's lover rather than his queen Rukmini. The theology inspires the devotees to love Krishna as Radha loved him (Radha Bhavé). My father translated Git Govinda into Manipuri from Sanskrit in 1982. He also drafted a book titled *Radha-Krishna Premkali* (Radha's love for black Krishna).

Maharaja Bhagyachandra (1759-1798) installed an idol of Govinda at the temple of his Langthabal Palace in 1779. He then organised a ritualistic dance and music performance at the temple's mandab, which became known as Rasa Lila Jagoi (Ras Lila Dance). He introduced the potloi as the artist's costume. Since then, the potloi had undergone various fit outs and fitting-outs.

The present potloi is very elaborate in design. It is like a stiff barrel with an outer shiny satin or muslin fabric in a variety of colours, mostly pink, green and red. The top part of the main cylindrical body is continued with a soft satin/muslin material of the same colour as the body, stitched all around, while its top end is gathered around the waist with a belt.

The stiff part is decorated with sequined intricate embroidery, having

small round bits of mirror all over. Over the top of the oft part of the potloi, another piece of transparent white glittery fabric (poswan) that is equally stiff, is gathered either straight or undulated, and is fitted around the waist under the same belt.



Ancient Ras Lila dress in 1891. Floppy potloi like Ghaghara.

As it is, Meitei religion of Hinduism is superimposed on our ancient Sanamahism. Therefore, the embellishment of the potloi follows a certain pattern of Pakhangba's mysterious form as a Python.

Meitei men had not been left behind in the fashion hierarchy and haute couture. Astonishingly, the traditional dress of Meitei men - the '*Pheijom*' was like that worn in other parts of India, influenced by the climate, despite their isolation from the rest of India. It was a Dhoti, a bit narrower in width. Meitei men's formal garb comprised of *Setnafi* or *Pheijom*, evolved from *Pheichom* (covering the thigh muscle). It was made of white cotton or natural silk or wool.

For daily wear, they had *Khudei* (from *Khuttei*, meaning for cleaning hands). It was narrower than a *Pheijom* and reached down just above the knees. It was woven in cotton, designed in small checks of a variety of colours. For a more formal occasion they wore a wider *Khudei* of yellow colour with red borders, made of more refined cotton fabric.

Meitei men usually did not wear *phurit* (shirt), but they had shirts made of cotton with long sleeves. On some festive occasions, the nobility could wear phurit made of velvet, mostly green. In winter, some wore an overcoat made of quilted material.

Most men walked barefoot or wore *khurum*, especially at home. Khurum were wooden clogs, which were made only at Sagolband Meino Leirak and sold at Khwairamband Keithel. They were hewn hard wood for the sole that was about three quarters of an inch thick, with a heel of one inch thickness. For the strap, which was about three inches wide, they used the inner lining of lorry tyres. It cost about half a rupee.



My brother Gokulchandra wearing *khurum* and formal dhoti and Pumyat.

Leather shoes were available, but most people could not afford them. Canvas shoes with or without rubber heels, were also sold in the market, but they were not popular in Imphal. More prosperous people used soft leather pump shoes with low heels and without laces, to go with pheijom as a fashion.

With the pheijom, some Meitei men wore *koyets* (turbans) on certain ceremonial occasions. Meitei soldiers wore dark coloured koyets with cloth straps. So did the Meitei cavalry. Certain distinguishing koyets

were the privilege of only some people, such as the descendants and relatives of the Raja, wrestlers, and runners. Koyets with a projecting front, often known as *lamkhangpak*, were worn by Raja's attendants when they accompanied the Raja to a temple to worship or while delivering him a massage.

These koyets were like the ones that are now worn by Brahmins while serving food at utsav (Ceremonial feast), coiled in a way from one side of the face to the other to cover the mouth. More elaborately, coiled koyets with feathers of the Argus pheasant, were worn by the crew on the annual boat race (Hiyang Tannaba).



My father Gulamjat Singh donning a Koyet with formal dress.

Ancient Meitei men used to keep their hair long and tied at the back in a ponytail. Over the years, men's hairstyle changed as it did in other parts of the world. The modern hairstyle became fashionable in the early 1930s. It was known as *Dhakka cut*.

In the late 1940s, the trendy hairstyle was close-cropped on the sides and back like the American GI crew cut. In the 1950s, most youngsters copied the hairstyle of Bombay film stars, such as Dilip Kumar or Dev

Anand. Some boys with a tough streak in their blood, had their heads shaved from back to front, leaving only a thick crop in front, to show they were tough (*leechei maru*).

Meitei men did not like paid menial work such as hair-cutting or laundering for others. There were no professional barbers. All young Meitei men knew how to cut each other's hair. So, there was no shortage of amateur barbers. But there were a few Mayang barbers, known as *Napet*, who were essential during *Nahuitpa* -a Hindu religious rite of ear piercing at the age of 4-5 years.

By late 1940s, a handful of Bihari barbers have arrived in Imphal. They sat in a row in the shade of trees by the main Kangla to Kangchup Road, where the Rupmahal Drama Hall is now situated and opposite the Polo Ground. They had low wooden parcel boxes for the clients to sit on. They charged a *sikki* (a quarter of a rupee).

In the 1950s, they set up decent small cubicles at the vacant part of the Sadar bazaar on the western side. They installed metal car seats resting on heavy metal car wheels from war salvage depots. I was very delighted as it simulated haircutting salons in Indian cities like Calcutta and Bombay. The price went up for the better facility. One rupee a haircut. It was equivalent to three rupees I used to pay in Calcutta or Bombay.

There were no cobblers among Meiteis either. Just after the War, there were 4 or 5 Kabui men who sat by the main Kangla-Kangla-Kangchup road, again by the mapal Kangjeibung, to repair shoes. About this time, Bihari dhobis also arrived in Imphal. They settled somewhere near the Khwairamband area.

Meitei women did not require hairdressers for coiffuring their hairstyle except for teenage unmarried girls. They had a unique hair fashion – *Leishabi hairstyle*, a bit like that of Cleopatra. It is now known as Moirang Thoibi hairstyle. Just before WWII, High School-going girls did away with

this fashion.

In general, before the Japanlan, there were three kinds of female hair style. Up to the age of ten, little girls had their hair shaved off from forehead to about the level of the ears to promote thicker hair growth. The hair at the back was left to grow loose. At about puberty, they had the *Leishabi hairstyle*.

In this fashion for the unmarried girls, the hair from about the level of ears was parted and combed back. It was allowed to grow and grow. It might be tied in a knot or left loose. The hair in front of the partition, was combed forward and cut about an inch above the eyebrows. A lock of hair about two inches broad in front of and over each ear (shai) was combed down to reach the angle of the jaw and cut straight.

All the mothers knew how to cut this style for their daughters. This Cleopatra hairstyle was to distinguish unmarried girls (Leishabi) from the married ones (Mou).

Once married (the day after the wedding) the girls combed all the 'shai' hair back and left it to grow and catch up with the rest at the back. The transitional hairstyle them extremely attractive, and they were romantically addressed as 'Mou Naha' (Young married woman).

Keeping long lustrous black hair hanging down straight at the back, was considered trendy and flattering. The longer the hair the greater the appreciation.

Married women never cut their hair but fashioned it in a way to let their tresses shine in a long ponytail, twisted at the back of the head in a bun. For those who could not sport long hair, they could buy long hair extensions that could be knotted in the original hair bun.



Mangka Mayanglangbam

(Photo credit: Mangangsana, Mangka's father & Oinam Doren, photographer).

This ancient hair style has now been reintroduced by the glamorous Manipuri folk song singer Manga Mayanglangbam. She looked stunning when she performed a dance and music repertoire, live at the opening ceremony of the 8th Polo International at Mapal Kangjeibung in 2014. My wife, my son Neil and I were spellbound like everybody else. Since then, few other artist girls have begun to wear this hairstyle.

While fashions come and fashions go, Meitei phanek Mapalnaiba fashion goes forever.

It is amazing how complete is the delusion.

That beauty is goodness.

Leo Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*

