

Health Care Pukhri Ishing



Engelei



Author in Shillong 1954.

I remember how I was swamped with excitement about Shillong after reading Dr Lamabam Kamal's novel Madhabi during my school days. The book is the first Manipuri novel of any genre. It is a fictitious prose narrative about the unrequited love between Madhabi and Dhirendra, as well as an intense love and adoration between Urierei and Birendra, a friend of Dhirendra. It is a cultural centrepiece of Meitei society.

Dr Kamal has an amazing faculty of bringing to life, two love stories in one novel, set in the not so distant past and based on the life and dust of Canchipur. His imagination of many geographical and historical facts of Canchipur to form an authentic background of the stories, makes the book read like a historical novel. In fact, I thought it was a real story when I was a little boy, as I often saw Urierei (fragrant caper vine) and Madhabi (Climbing shrub with fragrant white-yellowish flowers) plants

growing wild in our back garden.

The book contains some of the most riveting prose in Manipuri language. With his lean, muscular and pellucid prose, Kamal has the art to make things shockingly vivid. It is a literature of tragicomedy that blends with a truly unhinged bit of satire. The prose is beautiful, because it connects us all as human beings, despite our broad range of experience and beliefs.

In *Madhabi*, Kamal (1899–1935) describes the beautiful landscape scenery of Shillong as Biren and his friend Dhiren explored it, while holidaying there on their way back home from Calcutta after they got their MA degree.

Dr Kamal was very acquainted with Shillong. He went to Shillong to study at Government High School in Class X to sit his *Prabeshika* (Matriculation) exam under Calcutta University in 1922. Johnstone ME School had taught only up to class IX. It was only in 1924 that Calcutta University granted Manipuri as a vernacular subject for the Matriculation exam.

Up to date, there has never been a Manipuri novel like *Madhabi*. In this book, Kamal uses a liturgy of literary language in its lexicon. He was also a talented poet. He wrote an anthology of 18 poems, grouped under the title of *Leipareng* (Garland of flowers) in 1929, while he was posted as a physician at Tamenglong.

Come 1954, my euphoria about Shillong was about to end. My baptism of fire for Shillong quickly smouldered with smoke when I leaped out of my skin to chastise a college professor for slandering my character, which deprived me of my hostel accommodation. I became like a bear with a sore head.

I was overcome by the heady stench of vengeance like the Japanese who

believe revenge is purification. My immediate instinct was to launch a retributory attack, which I did, regardless of consequences. I would have been more than saintly if I did not harbour a sneaking lust to use them in real action. I could not suppress a flash of rage.

I went to Shillong to study at a college for a change of climate, and the tranquillity of a Hill station. I could have gone to college in Imphal at a tiny fraction of the cost. It was after two years of a care-free and frivolous college life in Bombay. Without hostel accommodation I knew I would be like a fish out of water. I learnt it the hard way in Bombay. Staying in a room as a paying guest in a matrilineal Khasi family was not something I saw as any kind of aesthetic triumph.

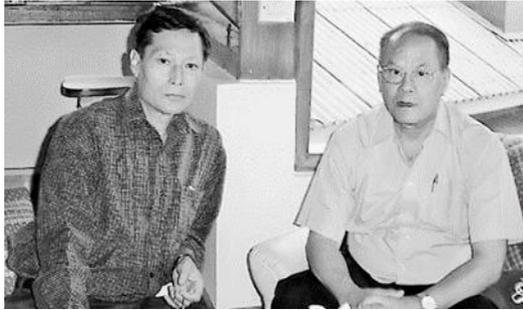
I was then a stereotyped Meitei youth with the geometry of Meitei national character as a firebrand. But, in my most ungovernable moods I still retained a sense of propriety, levity and gravity. However, frustration and disappointment, more than annoyance, motivated me to risk my life that had not started yet. Had I been arrested, charged for common assault (ABH) and thrown into jail for a term, I would not be writing this article.

I left Imphal for Dimapur by coach, en route to Shillong. Per chance, I had the pleasant company of my old friend Moirangthem Gojendra, and Yellangbam Sonamani, who were also going to Shillong. They were lecturers at DM College in Imphal. They have been selected for military training at Happy Valley in Shillong, for the newly established NCC (National Cadet Corps) in their DM College. That was the only college in Imphal.

A retiring Indian Army Captain, a white Anglo-Indian, called Harnet, was sent to institute the NCC in DM College. Harnet with his background of British Army discipline, was very good in handling and remodelling the attitude of the confrontational style of Meitei student cadets of DM College at that time. I was also equally recalcitrant. Only that I did my

studies mostly outside of Manipur.

Captain Harnet was due to retire after his posting in Imphal. Having noticed his efficiency, the Government of Manipur at that time, approached him to be the Commanding Officer of Manipur Rifles battalion (only one that time) with the rank of a Major. He accepted. And again, he did a very good job of it, especially as the *jawans* were all Gurkhas except for a handful of Meitei NCOs from the erstwhile Manipur State police (SMP).



Revisiting Shillong and the spot where I beat up the professor. 25 years after in 2006. With my nephew Dorendra, having lunch at Tripura House (Royal Residence of Tripura kings).

He eventually left to settle in Shillong as the manager of the small British time, Shillong Club, situated at Police Bazaar. Shillong Club is about 3 km away from Shillong Golf Club, where I played golf once, with my nephew, the late Dr Dorendra in 2006.

Time really does pass, burying everything in its wake. Once in a great while, however, something will stir deep beneath the surface of the present existence, a thing that is long gone in time and yet still alive. This creates a deep, rolling wave, a cold current under the surface of repressed memory. This is about my eventful but short life in Shillong.

Talking of Dr Kamal in Shillong and his medical practice in Manipur, makes me hark back to the health care system in Imphal as late as in the

1950s. Imphal town then, could only be described as a leafy and peaceful market town, where the townspeople lived happily but with literalness as they were unable to effect changes in lifestyle due to shortage of resources. On the other hand, Imphal had so long piqued itself on being an honest and Vaishnavite moral town that it had grown to fancy itself too genteel.

Most people in town existed by subsistence living, and in the villages by subsistence agriculture. That was growing only one crop a year – paddy. The disadvantages of monocrop farming were among other things, destroying nutrients, making vulnerable to pathogens, and needing a lot of water to irrigate.

People in Imphal were generally insouciant and complacent. Nobody suffered from pathological depressive illness. All the women in Imphal, worked very hard to assist in the family economy, mostly weaving clothes on the looms. For men in town, there was a watershed - shortage of work. Following the British subjugation of Manipur and the discontinuation of *lalupkaba* (free service for the king), they became jobless. They did whatever they could to look after the family. Meitei women became alpha females.

Even as late as 1954, the health-care system in Imphal, like that of any other developing country was elementary. There was no government-funded health-care system. Nor was there any funded by public and private insurance. It was because health-care delivery was related to finance both by the government and individuals.

Even in 1964, by the time I started practising at the Civil Hospital in Imphal, the health care system was still rudimentary. I was only a graduate, and I was in charge of the medical department. It was I, who began using an old ECG machine, a basic diagnostic tool to diagnose heart troubles, for the first time.

Nature has been kind to Manipur. All the determinants of health, such as hygienic style of living, salubrious climate, wholesome food, the state of our own environment genetics and circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work and age were conducive to a natural health-care system. Besides, most people used indigenous herbal medicine, which our ancestors found to be effective and passed down over the generations.



Author examining a patient at Civil Hospital in Imphal in 1964.

The ingredients of herbal medicine were easily available in the community. They were in the category of the Hindu Ayurvedic system of Medicine and Islamic Unani system, though it was not as elaborate as them (cf. Author's Points to Ponder, *Ancient India & Ancient medicine of India* 2013, pp397-406).

Most people also relied on quacks; indigenous Meitei health practitioners known as *Maiba*. Many people died without a proper diagnosis and were often thought to have died of natural causes, or due to an encounter with a bad spirit, which needed exorcism with *thou toubu* (Propitiation to the evil spirits) by a Maiba.

The presence of a maiba was a requirement at the death of a person, as he had to declare a person to be dead. He did it from experience. Long before I became a doctor, I was amazed when a person with fluid in his abdomen (ascites), probably due to liver failure as I came to understand

later, was attributed to *lai oknaba* – meeting with an evil spirit - a python.



Python

No person was allowed to die indoors as the house would become unhallowed. The patient must be brought out to the mangol (veranda) to die. And once declared dead the person must be taken out to a corner of the courtyard inside a hastily prepared enclosure. Nowadays, this practice is becoming obsolete with access to healthcare with doctors and at hospitals.

Imphal had its annual share of vaccinations to prevent smallpox epidemics. I never knew anybody having smallpox. I remember how scared I was when the peripatetic vaccinator, before WWII, came to our house, scratching on our upper arm with their two-pronged scratchers, one way up and one way across, and then applying the vaccine with the other end of the scratcher.

A report of the Assam Gazette of the 21st of August 1897, recorded that “As a rule, the Manipuri population suffers marvellously little from the effects of Malaria. The total number of vaccinations [smallpox] performed during the year 1897, was 19,054, of which 18,969 or 99.55 per cent were returned successful. Vaccination is popular in Manipur, and among the more juvenile population is almost universal. There was only one dispensary in Manipur [Civil Hospital]. That was in Imphal. The daily average of patients attending outpatients in 1987 was 27.21 against 27.39 in 1986.”

In the post war period, another great WHO eradication programme against malaria, succeeded in preventing the disease by spreading DDT on the stagnant waters surrounding Meitei ingkhols. That stopped the mosquitoes from breeding.

Many people in the pre-war and immediate post-war periods suffered from many water-borne diseases, such as cholera, diarrheal diseases (Amoebic dysentery), typhoid and viral hepatitis. It was not only in Manipur. About 70% of wastewater from India's cities is emptied into rivers and lakes.

It was in 1955, while I was a student, Delhi had an endemic of jaundice (viral hepatitis). I had to fetch fresh sugarcane juice (Ganne ka juice) daily from the nearby market to give to my friend, Khuraijam Dharendra with jaundice. We were advised the juice as its treatment. As it was a virus that had no medicine to treat the condition, which was self-limiting in any case. It was due to contamination of drinking water due to a burst sewage pipe.

Meiteis, like people living in neighbouring Assam and Bengal except in the cities, used pond water (*Pukhri Ishing*) for drinking, as clean and sterilised piped water was not available. The water purifying plant at Kangchup Hillock was very small indeed. Normally, large ponds store water that is filtered underground.

Before the Japanlan, cholera and typhoid infections in Imphal were very common. They were seasonal as it was spread by contaminated drinking water from the ponds, which were infected by the overflowing of sewage during the rainy season. Even after the war, the disease was prevalent though sporadic and with fewer deaths. Death from cholera occurred in a matter of hours, because of incessant watery diarrhoea and the collapse of the circulatory system of blood, eventually stopping the heart from beating.

In the post war period in Imphal, no patient with typhoid and paratyphoid fever, died as the new antibiotic Chloromycetin was available at chemist shops. There were a couple of them in Imphal town centre. Likewise, venereal diseases, especially gonorrhoea, disappeared because of the arrival of water soluble pre-filled Penicillin injections that was priced at 50 rupees per syringe. It was a lot of money then. Only one shot was enough.

Imphal lacked sustainable central purified water supply. As such, waterborne diseases did appear now and then, despite the legendary clean lifestyle and hygienic eating habits of Meiteis. Most families had only *Pukhri Ishing* for drinking. Big communal ponds like Ningthem Pukhri at Wangkhei, was safe as they could not be polluted by the overflowing of the open sewage system during the monsoon.

The Maharaj who was responsible for health and hygiene was not bothering as the revenue coming from the supply of piped water to households would be peppercorn, as most Imphal residents would be unable to pay rates for water, as it was the case for electricity. Besides, Meiteis were used to drinking Pukhri water for free for eons.

The main source of water for drinking and bathing was many large communal ponds. A few that I remember, were Ningthem Pukhri, Thangmeiband Pukhri, Lalambung Pukhri, Mantri Pukhri, Nungjen Pukhri at Kangla. The Ningthem Pukhri (Royal Pond) at Wangkhei was the largest pond in Manipur.

It was dug up by the royal patronage of Meidingu (king) Khagemba. It was opened on Sunday 2nd Kalen (May-June) 1726 CE. There were smaller ponds that catered for a Leikai or a large community. As these ponds stored ground- filtered water they were not contaminated. They were fairly clean in that no disease was ever seen to have spread from them, except in the rainy season when they got contaminated with stool from drop latrines.



Ningthem Pukhri, Wangkhei, Imphal.

Anyone could go and have a bath in it. For cooking, women of the family would collect water from the pond in reasonable-sized brass pitchers known as *sanabul*. Many ingkhols had small-size ponds for washing and cleaning. It was customary to have a pond in the left and eastern corner of an ingkhol if it was large enough. I remember having one in our ingkhol, in which I nearly drowned

The first water filtration plant was constructed on top of Kangchup hillock in West Imphal in 1913. The treated water from the plant was piped down the hill, subterranean, towards Imphal. It was made to run up under its own steam to the top of Iroishemba hillock halfway to Imphal, to enhance its potential energy for running downwards again to supply clean sterilised water to some parts of Imphal town.

From the top of Iroishemba reservoir tank, the water was piped underground along Uripok Road and elsewhere in Imphal. Standpipes, known as *toti* in Manipuri (also *toti* in Hindi), were put up at different distances along the main roads. The water from the standpipes was used not only for drinking but for some, for bathing and washing clothes. The water supply reached Bamon Leikai, across the river Imphal, because of its land connection with the Palace.

I lived at Uripok, not so far from Khwairamband Keithel. As a young boy, some evenings, I used to pedal my 'boys' Raleigh bicycle' along our Uripok Road and right up to the foothills of Kangchup hillock, were the

water refining plant was situated. I would then push up my bike to the small reservoir with treated water. There I would have a rest for a while, drinking a glass of water taken from the reservoir, in which I would drop an orange tablet.

Then, I would cycle down back home again. I was always in the habit of pedalling as fast as I could. I was then infamous for fast-cycling and fighting after a collision with other young bikers. One day, I had a head-on collision with a lorry in one of these escapades from Kangchup hill. I had a minor concussion. I survived.

During the rainy season when there was not much time for the basic water treatment plant to clear the floating solid wastes by allowing them to settle and by filtration (before disinfection by chlorine), the supplied water from the standpipes was just muddy and undrinkable.

My father being an engineer working in the PWD, would bring some alum (fitkiri in Hindi) and put a lump of it in a bucket of this dirt water. After a few hours the water would come clear as the floaters would settle at the bottom. It was then drinkable. Most other people naturally, would use pond water that was clean.

Talking of drinking water. Meitei national culture, which is shared by Meiteis throughout the land is highly influential in moderating Meitei behaviour as individualism (independent and self-reliant) and collectivism (accepting subordination to social collectively). Meiteis had certain etiquette in their daily eating habits at home and at formal *utsav chaba* or celebration feast. They customarily used the left hand to drink water from a metal jug while eating their meals with the right hand.

During the formal communal *utsav chaba* functions, a water jug was placed on the right side and in front of the banana leaf, used as a plate for eating. They also had their timeless cultural ethos that valued the importance of venerating their elders.

In the family setting, father and children would eat first, followed by mother. In the normal extended family, daughters and daughter-in-laws would eat after the 'mother'. Most fathers, who were heads of households, partook scrumptious piping hot Meitei cuisines, sitting cross-legged on a small low stool made of wood, while women squatted to eat.

Small boys like me ate with fathers, sitting on the right side of the pukham (metal plate) and from the same pukham. For breakfast, children ate the cold leftovers from the meal of the night before. It is worth mentioning that, by tradition, only the British ate cooked hot breakfast. Europeans ate only cold bread and butter.



Meitei Utsav sitting arrangements with water jug on the right. (L-R) author, brothers Yaima & Tomba and sister Pishak, in our Mamang shangoi.

I have written about Meitei Yumjao in Part 7. The floor of a Yumjao was always clay. The eating place must be wiped clean with water and dried before the meal was laid down on clean metal plates to eat. The cooking was done by the woman of the household.

When the family grew large and extended with married son, the daughter in law would take over the cooking for the family. As a matter of hygiene, a cook must have a bath before and wear a freshly laundered dress. A menstruating woman would not go to the kitchen during her period.

As a tradition among the Meitei community, many Meitei families that could afford, organised formal utsav chaba as the midday meal, on the death anniversary of their parents or grandparents on any day of the year, and for *Pirta tarpan* (offerings to their dead ancestors) once a year, in the month of October. My father organised such feasts every year.

Meitei tradition demanded a strict order precedence in the seating arrangements at an utsav chaba. They sat in rows, the eldest man first and then the rest in descending order of age. But some socially important man, out of respect, would be asked to sit higher up despite his age.

Women folk and children followed in sequence. When everybody was seated, the person at the head would announce that everybody could start eating. He would also indicate when feasting was over, and everybody could get up.

The meals were laid neatly arranged on two halves of banana leaves that were neatly cut in semi-circular bits and laid on the floor with the front half slightly overlapping the rear bit. A heap of rice was placed in the centre, surrounded by different dishes. A metal jug or glass was provided for drinking water, placed on the top right-hand corner.

The Brahmin cooks would go round distributing dishes of hot cooked food, one after another. The feast would have rice pudding as dessert, either white or purple rice (*Chak-hao*), followed by a small quantity of a warm sweetish fruit dish to energise the appetite again after eating all the savoury dishes. A small quantity of salt that was already provided would be used to help remove the turmeric stain on the fingers.

The greatest setback in terms of physical civilisation in Imphal was the lack of sewage system. But unlike 80 per cent of people who live in the villages in India where there is no sewage system and where they use the vast open fields for toileting, residents in Imphal town as well as in

the villages used drop-latrines.

Some towns in India, including the old parts of Agra City used drop-latrines that were cleaned by 'mehatars' - Indian name for those who do this 'monumental' tasks of cleaning human waste every morning by men, and cleaning the dry toilet by women.

This class of Indians of about 200 million, were known as 'Untouchables'. Mahatma Gandhi called them *Harijans* (people of God) which they disliked as patronising. They are now called *Dalits* (oppressed) or Scheduled Castes in the Indian constitution. When I was in Shillong, I was surprised that there were Sikh Harijan people to clean toilets.

Meiteis per se, were very clean people. Anyone who went to use the toilet, had to leave his clothes nearby. After completion and ablution, they would wash not only their hands but feet as well, before dressing up. They would not eat their midday meal without having a bath and without changing into freshly laundered clothes. That, they would do even in cold winter and with freezing water. Those who could afford to bathe in hot water were very few, usually the elderly heads of the family - the father and mother.

Heating water for bathing was not only costly as it was everywhere in the world, but inconvenient for Meiteis. They had only *phunga* (hearth) for it. The *phunga* was a fireplace in the middle of the Yumjao, which burned eternally and very gingerly with paddy husks. They used the ash from *phunga* to clean their metal pots and pans before washing them with clean water.

A metal tripod called *yotsubi* was placed over the *phunga* fire. And on it a metal vessel filled with water was placed to be heated, especially for washing the feet of the family members at night before going to bed. They had been walking all day bare foot. Another national hygiene.

The association of *phunga* with paddy husks had its origin in cultural and economic factors. Meitei Culture mattered in economic outcomes and related to cultural institutions of ancient Meitei religion.

The rice husks from paddy burned slowly as it contained silica and potassium. Only about a quarter of it would change into ash. They were available at no cost and its continuing use was cultural economics. Apart from its use as fuel, it was also used as cleansing or scouring agent for pots and pans.

Rice husks were freely available in the majority of Imphal families. The came from pounding paddy to get rice, which was the staple food for Meiteis. While poor people would buy their daily unrefined and cheaper brown rice from Khwairamband Keithel, most families stored paddy, which had to be pounded and winnowed daily in the evenings, by women of the household to get rice.



Phousuba (pounding of paddy). Photo credit: mfacebook.com

The pounding of the hulls of rice was done with a long rounded wooden pestle tipped with an iron ring in a large hollowed out hard wood block. It could be done singly or by two women alternating, holding a pestle each. They often sang a song rhyming and timing with the poundings, known as *phousum Ishei* (rice pounding song).

Later on, small stone circular grinders, known as *chakri*, about 50cm in

diameter in two halves, placed one on top of the other were available. They were carved by Meitei masons. The top half had to be turned round and round on a central metal pivot, with one hand holding a short wooden vertical handle fixed on the top outer side of the upper grinder. They would alternate their hands. The paddy was fed into a conical hollow in the middle of the top grinder.

The husked rice from the pounding and grinding was winnowed in a shallow round basket called yangkok, made of interlaced bamboo strips.



Yangkok



sangbai

Many townspeople in Imphal, owned rice fields in the countryside. They had verbal agreements with villagers as tenant farmers who tilled the land to produce rice. The condition was that, for every *Pari* (one hectare or 10117 sq. meter) they gave 14 “Shangbai-full” of paddy every year, to the owner of the land, and they kept the rest for themselves. A *Shangbai* is a basket made of interlaced bamboo strips. It holds about 30kg.

My father left two *Paris* for me. I gave one to my daughter Anita and the other to my son Neil.

The system of tenant farming worked well and continues. Even now, two-fifths of the world’s population that are engaged in agriculture, constitute as tenants and their families.

