



Engelei

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Part 13

Early Transport System



Manipuri barefoot soldiers setting off from Kangla to accompany Maharaja Chandrakirti on his way to Cachar for Jila Durbar with the Viceroy Lord Northbrook on July 30, 1874.

My narrative is based on the very flag-waving ballad, which was special only to Ibemni Devi, who sang it in the post war period, and only in the evening. I used to feel quite emotional to listen to her singing.

She had a special tempo and rhythm that were surreal. She would start her folk songs that were called *Khongjom parva* (Khongjom ballad) and *Jila Durbar* (District Parley) with the following verse as an Intro.

**manipur sana leimayol, chingna koina panshaba,
haona koina panngakpa, sanana mayung karaga,
lupana maphel oiba lam, manina phijil longumba,
manipur koubi lamnungshi, chingburoi-tamburoi pallibi.**

In English: In Manipur the golden crownland, fortified by hills all around, guarded by the hill people, warped by golden gossamers, wafted by the silver strands, hemmed by the gemstones, lovingly called Manipur, there dwelt hills people and plains people.

I heard this folk song quite a few times as a schoolboy. And I liked it so much that in 1974 when I visited Imphal, I engaged her to sing the Khongjom ballad at our home in Imphal and recorded the song. I have it on tape and listen to it every now and then.

The historical narratives of these two events in her original tempo and upbeat rhythm used to bring historical experience and evoke an emotional response to her listeners. She rendered the ballad accompanied by a *dholak* – a twin-headed drum, a folk percussion instrument, which she beat to give the song a foundation and pulse. It is hard not to be swept by the song's irresistible high gloss.

Today is the 1st of January 2021. It is the beginning of a New Year, but the Old year has not rung out yet for me and for many all over the world because of the pandemic. In my continuing effort to leave a bit of history of Imphal of yonder years, I wrote in passing about the transport system by boats in Manipur in the previous chapters.

I would like to share with you in this episode about an anecdote that captures the topic of the faster mode of transportation of Meiteis in the 19th century. It is a metaphor about a Meitei athlete who ran all the way from Cachar to Bishnupur during the infamous story of Jila Durbar.

Manipur, even today, has a very low per capita transport system. One can imagine what it would have been like in the late 1870s. Though the history of transport is largely one of technological innovations, such as steam engines and jet planes, ancient Meiteis had managed their own transport system by walking, running, crafting boats out of tree trunks, riding animals, to move from one place to another.

Before I proceed any further with this Meitei transport system that had groundbreaking connections with athleticism and sports in Manipur, perhaps it might be prudent for me to point out again that, my writings are not chronicles based on research, but simply scribing ancient Meitei stories that I, as a young boy, heard about or experienced as a way of life.



Lord Northbrook, Governor General & Viceroy of India.

This piece is a humanitarian account of an age (1874) – a period of naiveté, frugal style and simplicity of living in Manipur that was ruled by kings and courtiers in years gone by. This is the story of Jila Durbar at which Maharaja Chandrakirti was going to have a parley with the Governor General and Viceroy Lord Northbrook at the village of Malugram in Cachar Jila or Cachar district and near the British town of Silchar.

It is the legend of a Meitei athlete and the athlete's humanism. It was the only fast transport system available in Manipur at that time. This was how one top athlete, Maibam Tamar Singh, ran all the way from Cachar to Bishnupur and from there on horseback to Kangla, and then back again to Cachar, sleeping only for a few hours at night, using the only main transport of running and riding a horse for a bit.

He covered 196 km (Imphal to Bishnupur 26 km + Bishnupur to Jiribam 120 km = Jiribam to Cachar 50 km = 196 km). Out of which 120 km was

along zig zag, up and down the unmade serpentine mountain footpaths. He carried only a small bundle of *chengpak*, parboiled and flattened rice to eat for sustenance.

The top-down story of this Maibam Tamar Singh, who used to run as a mode of fast transport is unique. Fortune favours the bold. Nothing ventured nothing gained. It was at a critical time of about three or four days before the scheduled date of the infamous 'Jila Durbar' of Chandrakirti Maharaj with Lord Northbrook.

Maharaj Chandrakirti was invited by the Viceroy to the Jila Durbar on August 11, 1874. The venue was on board the Viceroy's Yacht by the banks of River Barack near the village of Malugram in Cachar district (4km from Silchar town).



Chandrakirti Maharajah.

Before he set off for the Durbar from Imphal, Chandrakirti was full of apprehension as he suspected it to be a trap to capture him. But he had no choice but to travel for the Durbar. He travelled in style and pomp, on the back of an elephant while his courtiers rode on horseback. His foot soldiers of about 3,000 Meitei and Tribals followed him on a war footing.

It seemed that Chandrakirti Maharajah, after reaching Cachar, became heavy with the gaiety of despair, and he cursed himself aloud in misery

horrors that he forgot to bring the flowers he offered to Govindaji at the Palace Temple. He took his error of recall as a bad omen. That might alter the course of his fate by sending himself to the devil. All was not lost.

While Chandrakirti was mired knee-deep in an unwholesome bog of dark despondency and with the weirdest dream of losing his liberty, Tamar Singh became the kindly light that showed at the end of a tunnel.

Although the strength of Tamar Singh, who was a fitness fanatic, was born out of desperation, it mirrored the stamina the Meiteis had in the sporting arena. It was such a great marathon run that had to be accomplished in the shortest time possible. It required a tremendous feat and a strong willpower.

To ditch the pensive mood of the king, Tamar Singh volunteered. He ran day and night all the way to Bishnupur along Tongjei Maril. From Bishnupur he rode on a horse to reach Kangla in Imphal. He went back the next day in the same manner, after collecting the *nirmala* flowers from the Temple.



Place for Jila Durbar at Malugram in Cachar District.

Tamar Singh was able to arrive back on time before the date of the Durbar with the flowers, and a message from his mother who said that if the flowers did not wither when they came to his hand he would succeed at the Durbar. The flowers were still fresh. That indeed, boosted the confidence of Chandrakirti Maharajah. He then, conducted himself

at the Durbar with dignified decorum of a Manipuri king.

All the worry of the king was for nothing. It turned out that, the purpose of the Durbar was for the Viceroy to ask Chandrakirti Maharajah to cede 1,000 sq gaj area of Manipur's territory at Thibomei (present Kohima), for a price.

The British India wanted to establish a military garrison at this place. At the Durbar, Chandrakirti was more than happy to acquiesce. In return, he was paid one lakh of rupees and 100 Martini-Henry rifles. He came back quite relieved and saying "Joy oire, Joy oire"

Legends apart, Meiteis had always been good in sports and athletics. They had a variety of indigenous indoor and outdoor games, some of which in the past, had been encouraged by their kings as mentioned in Chapter 12. I have here, my own analysis of why Meiteis are sporting.

Sports by its nature, were competitive. There were compelling cultural and political reasons why Meiteis took to the wire in such contests, awash in a sea of competitive optimism. Darwin's theory of the "Survival of the fittest" (1869) was a self-evident axiomatic truth for ancient Meiteis, though they were not conscious of it.

I would like to err on the side of caution and propound my hypothesis considering the theory of evolution by natural selection that, the Meiteis had an innate talent for sports because of their competitive nature in their frequent skirmishes and battles with their neighbours.

In a war-like situation of life and death, individual characteristics that favourably align with the specific requirement of a spirited sport, come to the fore. It is an acquired genetic disposition. This statement might be a bold and punchy observation, which might ruffle a few academic feathers. But we need to look further.

Meiteis, a tiny nation, had to defend themselves and live in freedom for centuries on end, except when they were routed and devastated by the Awa (Burmese) from 1819 to 1826 CE, and again in 1891 CE, by the British at the Khongjom Battle.

Following the Awa-Kathe (Burmese-Manipuri) War, which is known as *Chahi taret khuntakpa* (Seven Years' Devastation), the Meiteis were all but wiped out from the face of the Earth, during this Burmese occupation of Manipur for 7 years. Only about 1,000 of the population of Meiteis managed to survive.

In retrospect, the defeat would not have happened without the intrigue, betrayal and retribution among the Meitei princes. It was during the reign of Raja Marjit Singh when a palace conspiracy among a group of princes for the throne at Kangla, weakened the Meitei resistance.

On the other hand, it was a long-awaited revenge by the Burmese for what the Meiteis had been doing to them over the years. Revenge is a dish best served cold (Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 2007). They took with them thousands of Meitei men as prisoners. Some of them formed the famous Kathe Cavalry of the Awa Army.

One reason why the Manipuris raided Burma so often, as I come to understand, was because they had just been converted to Hinduism by missionaries and had been told by their gurus that if they had bathed in the Irrawaddy River at Sagaing (northwest Awa), all blessedness would attend them.

Indeed, their chief Brahmin insisted on coming to Awa himself in 1744 in order to convert the Golden Palace in Hinduism, but he fell ill and died in Imphal after staying for a month. His suite of lesser Brahmins returned home.

As I glean glimpses of highly competitive sports of Meiteis, it seems to

me that the physical activities that Meiteis indulged in sports during peace time had profound links with their performance during battles. Study of sports shows that everywhere in the world in ancient times, competition was used to determine whether individuals were fit to fight in the military.

Manipur like most places in India, had no modern transport until after WWII. Years back in Manipur, one of the highly competitive games was *lamchel Tanaba* (foot racing) by two men for about 800 metres. This was a favoured royal sport, involving the monarchs. The races were between two *panas* at a time. The winning athlete at the end, was exempted from *lallup kaba* (labour for the king in lieu of tax).

Lamchel was an early form of human transport in Manipur as it was worldwide. Running is quicker than walking. Our first ape ancestors began to walk on their two hind legs, known as bipedal apes, in the savannah of North Africa, 4 million years ago. This was the time when the forests began to thin out because of drought, and the apes began to venture out of forests, foraging for food.

By about 2.6 million years ago in the Pleistocene epoch, when huge parts of the globe were covered with ice (2.6 million – 11,700 years ago), our human ancestors, the Neanderthals had the skill to run in order to hunt animals for food. That was *lamchel* or racing in competition to the animals.

Meiteis eventually learnt the use of canoes (dug-out tree trunks) as a mode of travel on water. Manipur was filled with many lakes (*pats*) and wetlands that are filled with water during the rainy season. This form of travel was particularly convenient for people inhabiting around the large lakes like the Loktak *pat*.

Around this time, 12,000 years ago (Neolithic Period) when our Meitei ancients began to shift to agriculture from hunting and gathering, they

began to trap animals and train them for transport. They had used buffaloes, oxen, ponies and elephants for transport. Mules and donkeys were not natural animals inhabiting Manipur. They had also been using *Dulai* (palanquins) for human transport, especially for royalty and courtiers.

Ponies were special to Manipur. They were known for being very tough despite their size. Many ponies had been available in Manipur for eons, but they had been used mainly for the sport of *sagol Kangjei* (hockey on horseback) in peace time, and for mounted troops at war.

According to *Kangleiron*, horse racing (*sagol tanaba*) was introduced during the reign of king Mangyamba in late 16th century. And the game of polo (*sagol kangjei*) first began in 48 CE. Churachand Maharaj used to do horseracing at the Shillong Racecourse taking Manipuri ponies.

Most households in the villages and even in Imphal, had two or three horses. It is inscrutable why the Meiteis did not use ponies for transport. The Lamphel pat in Imphal during the dry season was a grazing land for cows and horses belonging to people living around it.

Youngsters would go there with a length of rope to catch a horse, mount it and gallop without a saddle in the Red Indian style. So, most youngsters in the villages and Imphal, knew horse-riding. I learnt horse riding while studying at hill stations like Darjeeling and Nainital, and during holidays at Matheran and Panchgani Hill stations near Poona.

The invention and the use of wheels changed the world of transport. The first wheel was invented in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) in 3,500 BCE, but the name of the inventor is unknown. The first wheel with wooden spokes came out in 2,000 BCE. In England, the engineer William Stanley developed the steel-wired spider wheel in 1849.

It was the Japanlan that brought all kinds of automobiles to Manipur,

reassembled from the War salvage depots. Many families began to own a vehicle mostly jeeps. They gave Imphal town a facelift as a modern town. It was very delightful for me. Our family also owned a jeep, and later an Ambassador Car, to keep up with the Joneses.

The first passenger air travel in the world, took place between Petersburg and Tampa in Florida (USA) on January 1, 1914. It arrived in Manipur in 1950 as the Birla Airlines, using the left-over WWII Dakota planes. There were daily flights from Calcutta to Imphal with a stopover at Gauhati for 50 Rupees one way.

To recap. Peddling to a destination, long or short, was the only form of transport in Manipur. All the British pioneers who came to Manipur from the British base of Silchar, the headquarters of the Cachar district in Assam, came to Manipur on foot or horseback where feasible.

The well-known character of Mrs Grimwood walked to Manipur most of the way, and at times on the back of a Hillman. The British forces that invaded Manipur from three directions came to Imphal on foot. The officers rode on horses where they were practicable.

The most popular modern transport system in Manipur since the late 1930s, was by bicycles. These two-wheeled pedal bikes became available in large numbers after the Japanlan, as they became more affordable. Before the war, only a few people could afford to buy them. Owning a bicycle was high society.

There were two or three brands of bicycles differing in qualities. The most expensive ones were made by Raleigh and Humber. They all came with a bell ringer fitted on the right side of the handlebar which was operated by using the right thumb.

The luxurious ones had extra fittings as optional, such as a longer leather saddle and chain cover, which could be half or full. The cover prevented

the crank and chain from chewing trouser bottoms or dhotis of cyclists. A small flat metal rack for carrying cargo and panniers, attached to it at the back and above the rear wheel was an option. The wheels had mudguards to prevent mudslinging all over the cyclists.

Over the years, a small kerosene-fuelled front light for night cycling became available. Soon after the War, a small front mounted electric spotlight, which was operated by a tiny dynamo in a casing attached to the left front or hind frame bar became fashionable. As the bicycle moved, the top wheel of the dynamo could be made to lean on the rubber tyre of the bicycle wheel.

As the dynamo wheel rotated it produced an electric current and power that lit up a small filament light bulb in the spotlight. The faster the rider pedalled, the more was the power and the brighter was the light. After the War, women's bicycles with step-through frame, unlike men's with a high cross bar, became available. A very few high school girls used it. Haobam Ibechaobi was the only one from Uripok.

Imphal had hardly any automobile before the War. I can remember only an old convertible car that was owned by a friend of my father from Uripok. Sometimes, he used to take me and my father for a long ride in the evening in summer.

Maharaja Churachand had a Ford car – the first car that he bought from the Kasturi Marwari family in Imphal. It costs the Maharaj Rs 4,000. It was a lot of money then. The Kasturi family in the early 1950s, owned a big American car with fin-end designs, which was parked in the street of Maxwell Bazaar, in front of their building.

The political Agent Mr Christopher Gimson did not have one. I remember Mr Pearson, the pen-ultimate British administrator had a small Morris Minor. I have talked about him earlier, and how I went to meet him at the Political Agent's Bungalow in Imphal.

Out of interest, Mr Pearson returned home to England. He became a farmer and later an MP in Parliament. He got MBE. He became a Baronet and died only in 1991.

Imphal had a single bus before the war to ferry people from Imphal to Nambol, Bishnupur and Moirang and back daily. It was parked by the main road at Wahengbam Leikai near thong Nambonbi (Hunch-back Bridge) over the Nambul River.

There was another truck called Dak Gari that was used for transporting mail to Dimapur and back. It was painted red as a mail vehicle. It was owned by the Marwari Kasturi family. There was a bench seat in a narrow compartment, partitioned just behind the driver's seat and the body of the vehicle.

It was used by VIPs to travel to Dimapur where they caught a train to go elsewhere and again on return. I remember it because just before the War, it once came to pick my parents and my younger sister Rupobati when they were going on a pilgrimage to Brindavan, Mathura and Kashi.

The Second World War brought a lot of drastic changes in the world. The best of which was the beginning of decolonisation by the Western European powers and America. It brought independence to India from Great Britain; to Indonesia from Netherlands; the Philippines from America; and many Arab states from French. The independence of sub-Saharan Africa followed gradually and slowly.

Manipur was not left behind. It became independent. The Japanese not only brought modern transport to Manipur, but it also left a profound bearing on the political, cultural and social aspects of life in Manipur, both in the valley and the hills. It had brought a new dawn on the horizon, which had ushered in mechanised transport.

Thanks to the ingenuity of Meitei Mechanics, who, though they had not

been trained or apprenticed, could assemble motor vehicles from bits and pieces, which were found in the junk yards of WWII, such as 144 CRP that was located at Moirangkhom by the main IB Road and the beginning of the slip road of Sougajjam Leirak.

Because of the handiworks of these motor mechanics, Imphal by 1947 and before Indian Independence in August, was full of jeeps, motorcycles, trucks for transport of good, and buses for transport of passenger, from Imphal to outlying villages and back.

Travel to Dimapur Railhead and back to Imphal became more comfortable and faster taking about 6-7 hours each way. The buses made it easy for village women to come to Ima Keithel at Imphal to sell their produce of vegetables, fish and other paraphernalia of living.

The dirt roads to Ukhrul, Tamenglong and Churachandpur became tarmac roads, fit for jeeps, Because of improved transport there were more students from villages and hills, who went to High schools and college at Imphal.

Education became a state responsibility. During the 1950s, students from grade High Schools through university-level, began studying old kinds of subjects. Education also helped students to develop sports and athletics in the immediate post war period in Manipur. Sports is big part of education while education is important in sports as it helps students to inculcate discipline, integrity and communication.

As mentioned in passing in the previous chapter, the first Olympic Games were held in Imphal in 1947 by a sports body called Manipur Olympic Association. MK (Capt) Madhurjit Sana Singh from Janmastan, was the President and N Binoy Singh from Nagamapal, a very athletic college student at the Presidency College in Calcutta, was the Secretary. Manipur Olympic Games continued yearly till 1954. I knew Binoy very well. I went to see him just before he died.

There were many annual exhibitions where the hill and valley people took part. As a result, there were more communications between the hill and valley people and they became closure physically and mentally, identifying themselves as Manipuris.

I also knew Sagolsem Indramani Singh from Thangmeiband. He was a pioneer in bringing the sports of body building and weightlifting among the High School students. From around 1949, he trained Meitei teenagers in the art of body building, using the courtyard of his home. He produced many young muscle men.

A few of them would exhibit their strength in bending an iron bar of 2.5 cm thickness, placed against the sternum bone of their chest. Some would hold 2.5 cm long iron nails in their palms and hammer them through an inch thick plank. This was also the time when the sport of boxing became popular.

Indramani helped Laisram Manaobi Singh who was the owner of Friend's Talkies, and Salam Gambhir Singh, a businessman, to organise the annual Mr and Miss Manipur contests in the early 1950s, in which many Meitei high school girls and boys took part. The prizes included cows and money. I remember the first Miss Manipur, one Khumanthem Mema Devi from Singjamei mathak, a petite but very attractive girl.

In 1955, Waikhom Damodar (ex-IGP) from Moirangkhom and I organised the first Manipur Table Tennis Tournament which was first played at the new Johnstone school auditorium. I was the umpire.

It lasted only a couple of years partly because we were college students studying outside of Manipur, and partly due to our Meitei trait. Which is, we are quickly enthused to organise an event, but are very lackadaisical in post-event follow up. Still, we do survive and prosper.

Nobody is perfect. Life is about choices.

