



Engelei

Part 15

Beginning of Japanlan in Manipur



Ima Keithel (Mothers' Market) by the bank of Nambul River on the north-east side of Maharani Thong in 1942.

The commonest and gravest error of modernity lies in believing that antiquity is dead (Clark Ashton Smith, *The Black Book*). I could not agree more. The discovery of human antiquity in the middle of the 19th century by a Scottish geologist Charles Lyell in 1863, has helped us in understanding the human past. He also contributed to the *theory of evolution* before Charles Darwin.

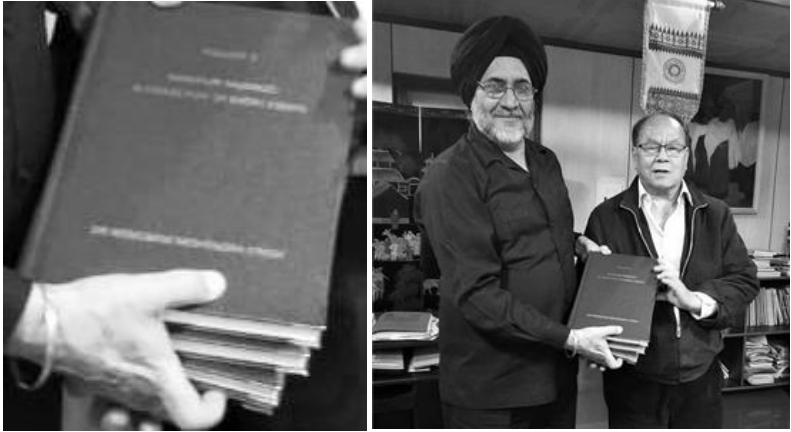
Antiquity is a period before the Middle Ages and earlier. Middle Ages is classified in the West from the 5th century to the 15th century. The 5th century is when the Western civilisation began.

Meitei history spans back into the ‘classical Antiquity’ (historical) period, in first century, CE. The study of Meitei antiquity will help us to understand ancient Meitei material culture. Meiteis have been trying to understand their antiquated ancestors, how they lived, how they faced challenges, and what were their laws and their mistakes.



Our Irengbam sagei Apokpa Temple at Uripok. Every year we pay homage (Apokpa Khurumba) to our ancestors. Seated from L-R. My son Neil, my eldest nephew Sudhir, and the author

Meitei ‘ancestor worship’ (*Apokpa Khurumba*) maintains an ongoing close relationship of their long dead ancestors with the living (cf. Author’s book, *Manipuri Musings*, 4 volumes in the coffee table size, kept in the Library of Manipur University, Canchipur in Imphal.



Mr Jarnal Singh, officiating MU Vice Chancellor receiving my books, Manipuri Musings in 2019.

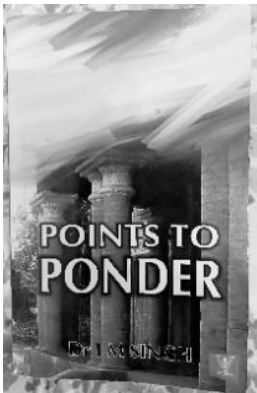
The book is a swiftly produced monograph of an anthology of a few places and people of Manipur that relates to the fag-end of the Modern period. Modern period begins from the end of the middle period to the early 20th century. The Post-modern period began from the 1960s to the present.



Chief Minister Mr Ibobi receiving a copy of *Points to Ponder*. 2013.

Venerations of our long dead ancestors by lineage organisations symbolise Meitei belief that their dead ancestors are physically present to look after their welfare. That Death is only a technical problem. I have just transliterated and published Irengbam genealogy puya from Manipuri into English. We venerate our ancestors every year with a feast (cf. Author's Points to Ponder, pp156-159).

My story thus, begins in the late modern period. And I am trying to recapture a sliver of religio-cultural, politico-economic and the educational backdrops of Manipur in the immediate pre and post Japanlan years, warts, and all, and with its old-fashioned glamour and naturalness.



Governor of Manipur, Mr Gurbachan Singh Jagat receiving my book Points to Ponder at Raj Bhavan, Imphal in 2013. (L) My friend Khurajam Dhirendra Singh who wrote the Foreword for the book.

It is as much presence as absence of the people and their outlook. It is also to red-pencil how the Meiteis have been holding the bonds of time and space together, as well as how our culture and traditions have changed very little over the years, while acculturating other people's values and cultures.

Regions and places have a unique effect on the development of human culture and behaviour. The physical environment of Manipur blockaded

by the nine skeins of mountain ranges (*chingna koina punshaba*), in a way, reflects characteristic Meitei identity and culture.

I was there in Imphal in the beginning of 1942 when the Japanlan came. After the prevailing disquiet of 1941, when World War II was only the sound of distant drums, far away across the sea, the shadowy silhouette of Japanlan began to cast its shadow across the bright firmament of Manipur, like the dark clouds of an impending storm.

Everybody knew for a few months that the Japanese were coming, when many mules arrived in Imphal for the transport of military logistics into the jungles of Burma through Morey, the town on the Indo-Burma border. It did not however, make much of a deep and dialectical flow of feelings among the laid-back Manipuris until the surprise Japanese bombing of Imphal town on Sunday May 10, 1942.

No one had the foggiest idea that the Japanlan would transform and broaden the social, religious, economic, and educational horizons of Manipuris for ever. Nobody had a clue that it would be so magical, and the genie would never return to its bottle.

At the beginning of 1942 it was evident that the Japanlan was just around the corner. We had heard about Adolf Hitler and Chiang Kaishek. There were bomb shelter trenches dug up in the bazaar area and along the main roads like Uripok and Sagolband. Some were straight, some V-shaped.

The British Administration told Imphalites to dig up such shelters in their Ingkhols. We had a V-shaped covered trench, dug out in our inkhol. Blackouts at night were imposed to prevent any ray of light escaping from houses that might help the Japanese in their air raids. Shrill sirens occasionally blasted during the daytime from the cantonment in Kangla.

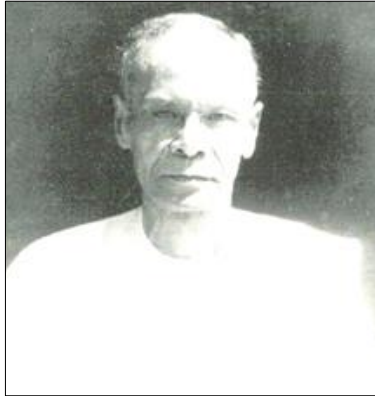
Imphalites thought the sirens were practice runs as there was no news about Japanese reconnaissance planes flying over Imphal. Only after the bombing, my father was told by Mr Gimson, who himself had not known that the sirens were real warnings of the Japanese planes over Imphal.



Long Rtd Mr Christopher Gimson [died Nov 1975].

Somewhere on a hilltop, south of Imphal, a section of Assam Rifles was posted with orders to watch for Japanese aircraft and to heliograph a message to headquarters at Kangla, whereupon a siren would be sounded from the top of a metal pole erected near the western gate. In the good old days, the siren was a steady blaring sound every day exactly at noon. Imphalites then knew it was *numityungba* (noon).

My father knew months before the bombing from Christopher Gimson that, the Japanese were on the way to Manipur. He then prepared a lodging for our family by renting a mamang shangoi [front outhouse] from a family in the Senjam-Chirang village, about 19 km from the hydroelectric powerhouse at Leimakhong, which he kept running during the War.



Long Rtd My father Irengbam Gulamjat Singh [died March 1992].

In anticipation of the Japanese bombing, my father coincidentally, hired a lorry from our neighbour Kangabam family, to take us to the village of Senjam-Chirang, on the same Sunday afternoon of the first bombing. For reference, this village was not very far from the village of Phayeng, which we all know, in West Imphal Valley.

I mention Phayeng because it is unique in that, it is the village that produced the first known Meitei Christian, Angom Porom Singh, the right-hand man of the missionary Rev Pettigrew, a canny Scot missionary from Edinburgh (1869-1943).

Pettigrew established the first Baptist Christian Church in 1901 in Ukhrul, with the help of Porom. Pettigrew also organised the Manipur Labour Corp for the WWI with Porom as one of the interpreters. Phayeng is also the first in India to be a *carbon positive village*. It means that the village sequesters more carbon than it emits. Phayeng still continues to celebrate Lai Harauba in the ancient Manipuri dialect.

The Meitei primitive innocence had a knock on the head when the first Japanese bombs fell upon Imphal town on Sunday, May 10, 1942, and again on Friday, May 16, 1942. The townspeople of Imphal were jolted by the sounds of the first bombs exploding over the town centre. The

chilling truth flashed in their head that the Japanese had indeed arrived after all.

Having switched off the chatter of everyday talk of the coming war, most people from central Imphal fled their homes to the outlying villages as news quickly spread by word of mouth that the Japanese were really dropping bombs in central Imphal. Soon, the Meitei families from central Imphal began to flee.

The Marwaris from the town centre, left for Calcutta as soon as they could, along with some of the Indian refugees from Burma, who were put up in temporary huts at Koirengai, about 10 km from central Imphal.

A military aerodrome was later built at Koirengai by American engineers in the early phase of the “Battle of Imphal”.

An estimated 60,000 refugees, mostly Indians with a handful of Europeans, trudged all the way to Imphal from Burma, across the steep rugged mountain footpaths and via the Manipur border town of Moreh. It began in 1941 when the Japanese troops entered Burma.

Among the refugees were a few Sikhs. A handful of these Sikh families continue to stay in Imphal till today. As Sikhs are diligent by their nature, they soon became prosperous and affluent over the next few years. They have become so well established now that, there is now a large Gurdwara in Imphal and another at the business town of Moreh.

When the Japanese bombs were thudding in the Bazaar area, I was eating some raspberries on a *khongnang mana* (leaf of a peepal tree) that I bought for a pie (one third of a paise) on the Uripok roadside. I saw people running helter-skelter. So, I walked home to find our family members packing bags and bundles. They had not missed me. I did not know what was happening. But I was soon off with our family, striding down Kangchup Road towards Iroishemba in the west.

We left the house locked up. We traipsed all the way to Senjam-Chirang via Lamshang Keithel. Half-way, I was riding piggy-back on my eldest sister-in-law Ibemhal. The lorry that my father hired, understandably was unavailable. The evening was closing in by the time we arrived in the village. We settled in our prearranged dwelling place like a hotel, which my father had rented and converted as our family home with adequate lighting by hurricane kerosene lanterns.

Our Senjam-Chirang village was a serene countryside with a crystal-clear shallow brook, running through its centre on a bed of pebbles. I loved the babbling sound that was produced by the current of water as it was interrupted by pebbles and small rocks causing small eddies.

There was an orchard in the village that belonged to the king at Imphal. It was full of reddish one-inch-long leeches. Bigger two-inch long grey ones lived in the water in any outside pool. We little boys removed our clothes and practiced swimming, by diving into the water. Experience told us that we had to climb up ashore quickly before the sticking leeches had time to bite and suck our blood.

Though the hosts in the village were very welcoming, tension gripped the refugees after only a few weeks like storm clouds gathering just before rain. It exploded after a couple of months, not from the Japanese bombs, but from the malarial parasites.

Three or four people among the refugees in the village would die and be cremated on the banks of this stream every day. Some of our family members including me suffered, but we survived. Thanks to our father. It was like living between the devil and the deep blue sea. Japanese bombs on one side and malaria on the other.

Malarial parasite is the deadliest animal in the world. It kills people very quickly within a couple of weeks due to multi organ failure. It begins with flu-like symptoms like aches and pains and feeling out of sorts.

Then comes very high temperature beginning with extremely cold and shivering and shaking like mad.

No number of blankets are warm enough. This fever subsides after one or two hours with profuse sweating. The paroxysms will come repeatedly and regularly, every 24, 48 or 72 hours, depending on the species of the parasite. It takes away the appetite with nausea and vomiting. Without treatment most patients will die.

My father knew about the prevalence of the disease in those areas. He procured bottles of the bitter green liquid quinine for treatment from a compounder who used to work at the Civil Hospital in Imphal. He treated us like a doctor. He and the local villagers were immune to the disease due to previous exposures. As a little boy at that time, I thought I would never survive to be an adult. Our next-door neighbour, the Pangangbam family, lost half of its members.

My father used to commute every day on his bicycle, from the village to Sanahal Lokchao at Leimakhong where the hydro-electric plant was built. Sometimes, he stayed there for a few days when he took me with him, me sitting on the cross bar of his bicycle.

I still remember. During this journey of about 20km, he would not speak a single word to me, but I knew that was the normal relationship with his young children.

The powerhouse was guarded by a section of the Gurkhas of the 4th Assam Rifles from the Kangla Cantonment. In the mornings, it was such a delight for me to eat a hot juicy paratha they gave to me. They spoke Manipuri.

My father cycled to see Mr Gimson in Imphal a couple of weeks after the second bombing. He kept the power supply running in Imphal town. Gimson told him that Imphal Town centre was deserted, and the abandoned shops were guarded by the Gurkhas from Kangla.

Many small-time thieves had a field day in the couple of days after the bombing. The Marwari merchants from the town centre, also left by motorised transport to Dimapur with some refugees. Many other refugees left Imphal on foot, along the Old Cachar Road for Silchar.

Gimson was bemused that, while a few bombs fell on his Residency compound on May 16, 1942, one of them spurt a piece of shrapnel that blew a hole into his old favourite gramophone. He gave my father a small jagged twisted metal piece, which he brought home for us to see. One of the bombs demolished the main gate of the Imphal jail and all the prisoners escaped.

Gimson told my father further that, all the policemen had also deserted. He made a request for two Burma Police officers (British) to come and organise policing at Imphal. His liveried servants had also fled home to Assam. He had to manage on his own.

One year later, my second brother Yaima took me to Imphal one morning, with me sitting sideways on the horizontal bar of a bicycle to watch a matinée show of a Tarzan film with Johnny Weissmuller at MNB cinema hall in the town centre. A friend of his came along with us.

The town centre was deserted with all the buildings in ruins. A few Meitei traders using temporary shades in the Sadar bazaar (present Paona Bazaar), were selling several oddments, such as fish, vegetables and other commodities to various multi-ethnic soldiers, white, black, and brown. It was quite creepy, but the cinema halls were full, both with Meiteis and military.

Imphal was under Military Rule during the War. By the autumn of 1943, the British Army requisitioned about 8,000 homesteads, containing 20,000 villages in Manipur. But the changes in the political system had no visible effects on Manipuris except on the economic pattern. For many, the War gave unemployed Meiteis work in roadbuilding with so

much inflated money printed to finance the war. Something that had never been seen before.

By about the end of 1942-43, the Allied Army started building a two-lane all-weather Road from Dimapur to Imphal and from Imphal to Moreh, in a war footing, primarily for the evacuation of retreating British troops from Burma. It was named Indo-Burma Road (cf. Part 16) stretching 290 km from Dimapur to Moreh. It ran through the centre of Imphal, by the western gate of the Kangla Fort and through Palel, which is 30 km east from Imphal, and beyond up the hill and down to Moreh.

he IB Road had to be built as the victorious Japanese Army was steadily advancing in Burma, and thousands of refugees, both civilian and British military, including the famous Gen Slim himself, had to be evacuated. They had to trudge along and across the rugged mountain foot path all the way from Tamu in Burma to Moreh in Manipur. This sweep was 65 km long from Palel in the Imphal plane.

Palel by the IB Road, was a historic place in the Japanlan because of its airfield that was built by the Allied troops. It was one of the two all-weather airfields, the other one being at Koirengei. Palel airfield was highlighted in the "Battle of Imphal" as it was the only known battle involving the Indian National Army (INA) under Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

It was during the night of May 2, 1944, that, a unit of INA was told by the Japanese, to attack the airfield. They did it very valiantly. Unfortunately for them, the airport was guarded by the battle-hardened Gurkhas who were well entrenched, and who would not pay any attention to the plea to defect. They swore to be loyal to the British Crown. Besides, they were not Indians.

They repulsed the night attack, with over two hundred casualties. That showed the intensity of the attack. After 2 days, by May 4, they

withdrew to Khanjol, their base in the Indo-Burma border. Worse still, the Japanese despised the INA for their lack of success. It was unfair.

Now back to the construction of IB Road. The road building generated hundreds of thousands of rupees for Manipuris. It was during the early phase of the War. There was a lot of money to be made as labourers or contractors, for cutting the hillsides along large hillocks of the IB Road that connected Dimapur in Assam where there was a station called 'Manipur Station', to Morey town on the Manipur-Burma border. The road passed through Naga Hills outside of Kohima and through the centre of Imphal in Manipur.

For folks living in our village of Senjam-Chirang and adjoining villages, there was a small stretch of hills by the Feidinga bend of the road coming from Sekmai to Koirengei, around which and across the small



Picnic at Priyobrata's Hillock at Feidinga 1950, Author's jeep.
(L-R) front: 3rd Maibam Jamuna Devi, Arambam Saroj Nalini Devi.
(L-R) back: Author, Laisram Jogamani, Arambam Sarat.

river there is a hillock. On this hillock there are still ruins of Brick and mortar building that MK Priyobrata had it built as his country house. But it was not completed as the engineer had difficulty in procuring enough water supply. In 1950, a group of us [in the photo above; names of 3 girls have escaped my memory] went on a picnic there.

My brother who had just returned from Ashutosh College of Engineering in Dacca, before the Imphal bombing, was the architect of this building. He told me about it many years later. I understand it is now occupied by a unit of the Indian Army for counterintelligence.

Our village at that time, was very much alive and thriving with the fabulous smell of money. A labourer could earn so many rupees a day, which would have taken a month in normal times, even if such work was available at all. The hill-cutting as it was known, was extremely slow and tedious, which involved hand-carving of the hill sides with tools, such as lance-like metal jemmy bars (known as jumpet in Manipuri), pickaxes, shovels and baskets.

It took a few months to complete the work. My brother Gokulchandra, who was employed as an engineer, also made a lot of money.

Our village erupted with festivities with the vast money generated at Feidinga roadworks. Women folk in the village, including in our family, glittered with gold ornaments. They had gold necklaces, arm bands, bracelets, many rings on their fingers and dangling earrings.

The earrings with so much gold, were so heavy that the earlobes often split. Each had to be supported by a gold chain hooked around the top of the ear between the pinnae and the sides of the skull. When I returned to Imphal in 1945 to go to school, I was also fitted with gold ear studs by our family women. Some boys took me for a wimp. I had to get rid of them very quickly as I got bullied.

There were always fun and frolics in the village. Meiteis are very ingenuous. Touring circus shows, magic shows, Khubak Ishei, Shumang Lila, Lai Harauba and various other entertainments filled many an evening at large mandabs. The *thikadars* (contractors) lavished money so much, as to draw hilarity over their lack of prudence. They often became targets of Meitei stand-up comedians like *khutamacha*, who

appeared in a shumang Lila (outdoor drama) with a heist of pantomimes.

In the winter of 1944, as the WWII was coming to an end and to keep up with the festivities in the village, my father organised a Ras Lila performance. The venue was at an open grazing field in the centre of the village. It was lit up with electric lamps from a generator operated by my father's electricians.



My sister Irengbam Rupobati Devi.

Four or five Gurkha soldiers from the unit that was guarding his Power House, acted as security guards. My little sister Rupobati played Gopi Chandrabali and her cousin Nungshi played Radha. The most popular and the only educated Meitei girl diva, called Chandrakala from Lairikyengbam Leikai in Imphal, gave a stunning performance.

Miss Chandrakala was the first Manipuri, who made a vinyl record of her songs:

**waman khareda itasa, leijararoi Brindabanda,
jamunagi garbhanungda chongthaduna,**

**radhagi thawai tharage ita.
eina thawai tharaba kanda,
nayum nayum da halloko ita.**

In English: my girlfriends, I am very lovelorn. Its burden has become too great to bear. I do not want to exist anymore in Brindavan. I would like to jump into the channel of Jamuna and kill myself. Once I am dead you all can go home.

Our life at Senjam-Chirang village was not bad at all. It was like a holiday resort by the River of Senjam-Chirang. The womenfolk in the family in the first place, never had to go out to earn a living. Their daily chores were the same as those in Imphal.

I was talking about Koirengei airfield earlier. This gives me a great pleasure of my childhood innocence. It is a bit like Robert Burns's poem, 'Coming Thru the Rye'. It was located on the way to Imphal from Feidinga. It was 9km from the centre of Imphal town, and 6.4km from Feidinga.

It was quite an excitement in my childhood, to see for the first time, a few aeroplanes parked on the ground at Koirengei. They were camouflaged by the main IB road at Koirengei airport. I saw them only once while travelling by bicycle to Imphal with my eldest brother Gokulchandra.

Koirengei airfield was hurriedly built by the British Army in 1942-43. It was later discarded because of cross winds that sometimes made it dangerous for aircrafts to land (see later).

Later, American Engineers built the new all-weather Tulihal Airport to British specifications, early in 1944. The runway was longer than planned by the British. Here in England, I met an Englishman, Jack, in my local pub, who was involved in constructing the airport. When I asked

him, he said, it was because of a misunderstanding. When the British measured the length in feet, the Americans took it to be in yards.



American Cargo aircrafts at Koirengei airfield during WWII
(Photo credit; idsa).

During WWII, the Allied Army also constructed four other aerodromes apart from Koirengei: Tulihal, Palel, Sapam and Kangla sagolmang, for the supply of troops, ammunitions, food, and drinks including water for the beleaguered Allied forces in Imphal Town area.

The Japanlan was a windfall for Manipur. It left a readymade airfield at Koirengei, without which the Birla Airlines would not have started a passenger service to Calcutta, as early as 1950. It also left behind the Tulihal Airport which is currently in use.

Many redundant American Dakota planes from the War, were brought into service. I flew for the first time by this airline to Calcutta in 1952. The fare was Rs 50.0 one way. It took 4 hours. The planes were not pressurised. Cotton wool to plug ears and individually wrapped sweets were served as soon as the aircraft was airborne. They were meant to slow the rate of air pressure change on the eardrums. Basically, earplugs should be put in before the cabin door is closed.

While stopping at Gauhati airport, alcoholic and many soft drinks were

available. A peg of spirit was 4 rupees. I usually drank one gin and lime. No tonic for the usual gin and tonic combination was available in India in those days.

There came a time when I knew what was meant by crosswinds at Koirengei airport. Once on my way back home from Calcutta in 1954, the plane nosedived and was about to land over the runway at Koirengei airfield, when it took off again. The captain's voice over the tannoy soon explained what was happening. He could not land the plane because of crosswinds. We headed back to Silchar to spend overnight.

It was extremely disappointing for me as I had not been to Imphal for one year. What's more, at Silchar, perhaps looking at the riffraff of the passengers, we were to be lodged at a dingy fleabag hotel where the bus took us.

I argued vehemently that we were like first class (Train) passengers as we had all paid for the air fare, and therefore we were entitled to first class accommodation. It was quite a heated struggle. A few Manipuri students joined in. Whereupon we were put up at the old British Tea Planters' Club building for the night, with European style water closet. It sometimes pays not to leave things in the lap of the gods.

It was quite an experience to see how the European tea planters enjoyed themselves at the club, Silchar Club – Koi Hai, where they created the first European Polo Club modelled on Meitei Sagol Kangjei. It was then called 'Hockey on Horseback'.



Ancient Meitei polo players

Polo was then known to have been played only by the wealthy and the royal, while in Manipur it was played by the hoi polloi. And the origin of Polo *as it is played now* is beyond a shadow of doubt, Manipur.

