



Engelei

## Part 16

# The Battle of Imphal



The Battle of Imphal, March 8 -- July 18 1944  
(photo credit: en.wikipedia.org).

It always fills me with conscious pleasure when I engage my mind into overdrive to travel back in time and to remember those days just before and after the Japanlan (WWII) in Manipur. It now, gives me great happiness to determinately experience those days from the early 1940s to the early 1950s, when my life was simply filled with ambition, love, pride, and dissipation. I survived all the trials and tribulations of my childhood.

Since then, I have been trying to live a life of contentment, though mostly mendacious. Since Aristotle (4<sup>th</sup> century), happiness has been

thought of consisting of at least two aspects: (1) hedonia - pleasure aspect of well-being and (2) eudaimonia - a life well lived.

In my case, this happiness cannot be dissociated from memory of my past. Memory is mental time travel as against physical time travel.

Stephen Hawking, one of the most brilliant theoretical physicists of Big Bang fame, said, it is not possible to have physical time travel. While mental time travel into the past is possible as an evolutionary capacity to guide the future. Travelling through time forward has been considered a far-fetched science fiction theory. Not anymore.

Professor Brian Cox, a well-known theoretical physicist from Manchester University, explained at a Birmingham Science Festival in 2013 that, following Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity, time travel forward is possible, provided the object can reach close to the speed of light. As an object approaches these speeds, time slows down, but only for that specific object. If you go fast, your clock runs slow, relative to the people who are still.

He said, "A Time machine has already been built and scientists are working on how to make it more effective. One snag. It might be impossible for you to come back." It is a bit too pedantic for me and so I will leave it here.

Episodic memory is part of the more general capacity for mental time travel. As I have mentioned elsewhere, episodic memory is long-term memory that is recollected together with their context, in terms of time, place, emotions etc.

This capacity is also limited. It is not possible to recall memories before four years of age in our mental time travel backward. One can remember a few episodes after the age of four. This is called 'Infantile amnesia'.

Newer research disputes the theory of 'Infantile amnesia'. It is suggested that very young children do remember novel events, and these events can be recalled in detail from as young as two and a half years old. For the moment there is no consensus.

In my personal experience, I can remember a few episodic memories only from the age of five when I had my ear piecing ceremony. I remember the function when I had my head shaved, bathed, and dressed for the occasion. I remember being held on my father's lap when a Mayang *napet* (barber) pierced my earlobes with a needle and black thread after first rubbing raw turmeric on my ear lobes.

I remember a person, Dr Haobam Baruni Singh, a friend of my eldest brother, who attended the function. [As he confirmed it later, I knew it was history.](#)

I know what Voltaire, the French Enlightenment philosopher, said: "History consists of a series of imaginative inventions." But this part of my history is not an invention.

The good thing for me here in any case, is that I am not writing my history. Only some erratic memories. They are a bit descriptive with my personal analysis of events in the interest of young generations while I risk being jejune to the older readers. These memories are about the change in the world view of Meiteis because of the Japanlan that was fought in Manipur, known in historical war books as "The Battle of Imphal".

Perhaps some modern Manipuri historians might find just coherence in my vigorous insistence that World War II was an epoch in Manipur's history, following which the Meiteis changed from the static funky-old fashion to the cyber-new advances. I know it, because I was present then and there, and here now, after 80 years ago.

This change was innovative as it happened everywhere in the world. The standard of living rose, dress style changed, education, transportation and communication improved. There was also the alteration in Manipur's constitutional future by integrating with India.

Japan completely transformed the outlook of complacent Meiteis from lacklustre to a sprightly one, and from typical narcissistic Meiteis who held firmly that all those who differed from them in any respect were ignorant to more prudent and cerebral Meiteis .

WWII did arrive visibly in Manipur in 1942 with warplanes, tanks, armoured cars, and a variety of ethnic soldiers from the Commonwealth countries, such as British, Indians, Africans, Gurkhas, as well as American GIs. They fought the "Battle of Imphal" in 1944. The Japanese lost the war with maximum casualties – 60,000, including 14,000 died. Most of these losses were due to starvation and diseases. The Allies suffered only 13,000 casualties.

Manipur had its share of war casualties. Death, disease, destruction of properties and disruption of socio-economic fabric. Imphal suffered most. It was deserted though the main battles were fought in the countryside and hills of Manipur. Manipur was at a standstill.

I deem it worthwhile for the benefit of the young readers to write a bit of history of Japan, in the context of what happened to Manipur, as I experienced, and gathered from war history books. This was the first defeat of the 'invincible' Japanese Imperial Army. To be fair, they were fighting the United States in the Pacific, the British Empire and the Allies Army in the Far East and Southeast Asia.

The proud Japanese Army swept over Malaya, Singapore, and Burma like a whirlwind. They were experts in guerrilla and jungle warfare, the tactics of which were unknown to the West. Many thousands of war refugees came to Manipur from Burma in 1942 as the Japanese began

to advance into Burma. The refugees were mostly Indians who settled in Burma and some Europeans.

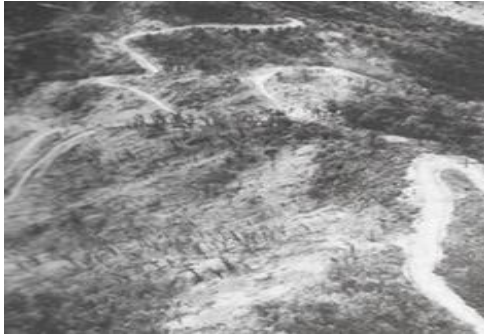
In the meantime, General William Slim who later became Field Marshall, was training an Army named the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, consisting of soldiers from the Commonwealth countries in jungle warfare. The majority were Indians. Slim had his Command Headquarters inside Kangla in Imphal. There is a Slim Cottage where he lived during the War in the Kangla Fort, now preserved as War Memorial.

In March 1942 Slim was promoted to Lt General to command the Burma Corp, consisting of 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Burma Division. Because of the superior Japanese force, he had to withdraw his Army and retreat to Manipur along a 9,000mile long track.

The Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army under Gen Mutaguchi was fighting Gen Slim's 14<sup>th</sup> British Indian Army in the jungles of Burma, with the aim of smashing their way to Imphal and Kohima in two-pronged attacks. Their objective was to defeat the Allied Army defending Imphal and use the provisions of food and logistics left over. In Mutaguchi's words, 'to put up a solid defence line'.

They were so confident in their success that, a group of Geisha girls was ready in Mandalay, to be sent to Imphal to entertain the Japanese officers after its capture.

The main Japanese thrust from Burma towards Imphal, was from south, by their crack 33rd Division, known as the "White Tigers". They tried to cut off Lt Gen Slim's 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, known as the "Black Cats", along the Tiddim Road to the south of Imphal.



Tiddim Road, about 109 milestone where the Japanese tried to cut off the 17th Indian Division. (Photo Credit: [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)).

The 17th Division was carrying out a fighting withdrawal into the defensive box in the key areas around Imphal town. It was in March 1944, when the Japanese tried their favourite tactics of blocking its retreat and destroying it at Tiddim Road, around the 109 milestone.

Tiddim Road stretched from Tiddim village in the Chin Hills of Burma all the way to Imphal. It was inhabited by the ethnic Paite (Zomi) tribe that also inhabited part of the adjoining hills in Manipur.

Meanwhile, knowing how superior the Japanese were in jungle warfare, an army consisting of a multinational force from Commonwealth countries (14<sup>th</sup> Army, *ibid*) was formed in eastern India in 1943 under now, full general Slim.

The training centre was in Ranchi. It was made up of the most diverse nationalities in the history of any major war. Over 40 languages were spoken and represented the world's major religions. They were trained in jungle warfare with aggressive tactics, including the formation of defensive 'boxes' by surrounding units, as well as in night-time fighting.

General Slim did succeed in repelling the Japanese invasion of north-east India after they fought their last battles in Imphal and Kohima. The Japanese were able to encircle the formations of the Fourteenth Army

but could not defeat them. They lost over 60,000 men and another 25,000 casualties mostly from sickness, disease, and hunger.



Gen Slim in olive green, jungle uniform of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army.

‘The battle of Imphal’ began on March 8, 1944, along Tiddim Road. An aggressive battle took place along a dozen miles or so between Bishnupur village and the former suspension bridge over the Leimatak River. During the next two months, Potsangbam and Ningthoukhong villages were the scenes of ferocious battles involving tanks on both sides. The battle ended on June 22, 1944, in favour of the Allied forces.



(Photo courtesy: Tank Encyclopaedia).

Japanese tanks came all the way to Imphal. Two of them were salvaged. One was displayed after the war, at the traffic island, opposite the south gate of Kangla, where now stands the statue of Gen Thangal. It was later moved to the compound of First Manipur Rifles. The other one was laid-out at the cantonment of 4<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles.

Gen Slim, after the war, was appointed the Commandant (1946-48) of the Imperial Defence College in London. He was later, promoted to Field Marshal in 1948. He became the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (1948-52). Finally, he was appointed the Governor-general of Australia (1953-1960). As a matter of interest here, Lord Mountbatten hoped to be promoted to a Field Marshall, but he was not that lucky.

The so called "The Battle of Imphal" was not a battle fought in Imphal town, but around the immediate periphery of Imphal, for the Japanese to capture it, and for the Allied to defend it.

“It was mainly for the control of the roads and tracks radiating out from the centre of Imphal, on a ninety-mile arc all around the Imphal plain; from Kanglatongbi ten miles north of Imphal Town, through the 5,833-foot-high twin peaks of Ningshigum, to Yaingangpokpi on the Ukhrul Road; Wangjing and Tengnoupal on the Tamu-Palel Road; Shugnu south of Loktak Lake; and Torbung on the Tiddim Road.” (cf. Maj Gen Julian Thompson, *Forgotten voices of Burma*).

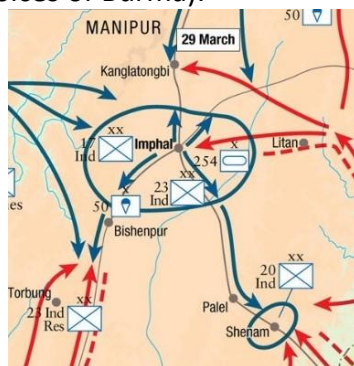


Photo credit: IWM. London

In the villages elsewhere in Manipur, people were engaged in their daily work in the paddy fields while the refugees from Imphal were left indolent as there was nothing they could do. They simply clung on to the hope that the War would end sometime, and they would all go back home to start a new life. Survival depended on their ability to focus on hope and doing bits what they could to eke out a living.

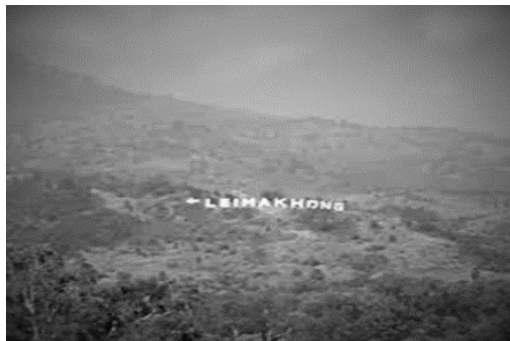


While the battle was raging around Imphal town, Khwairamband Bazaar in the centre of Imphal, was like a ghost town, while bazaars at Singjamei, Kongba, and Lamshang were thriving. There was also a little female bazaar, near a large military establishment at the foothills of Leimakhong Hill ranges, selling knick-knacks to the Indian soldiers.

Further up the Leimakhong, across the Sanahal Lokchao River, there was the only hydro-electric powerhouse that my father was running. It was about half a kilometre up a gentle climb.

A huge military establishment at the foothills of Leimakhong was established in 1943-44. It was full of activity which I noticed, whenever I was going up to the powerhouse with my father. It was between the present headquarters of the 57 Mountain Division of the Indian Army and the Leimakhong River. There was constant traffic of large military vehicles and medium-sized ambulance cars with Indian Army drivers, running up and down Leimakhong from Feidinga.

Near the present-day electric powerhouse at Leimakhong and further down the foothills, a large military base hospital, known as 'Number 183 Military hospital', was located, in tents, along with 'Number 41 Indian General Hospital'. They were established in 1943-45 to treat wounded soldiers evacuated from the front lines around Imphal.



Leimakhong (Stream of the Princess).

They had British doctors, and Australian nurses of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service. The whole complex was located on the left side of the main road running up to the Sanahal Lokchao Military camp. Some of these nurses used to come up for a swim with their boyfriends on hot summer days, in the small cool reservoir for the hydro-electric plant on top of the hill.

This large hospital was separated into two halves by a carriageway for ambulance cars, which branched off from the main road. The smaller hospital area on the west side of the carriageway, was for British soldiers and the bigger one in the east for Indian soldiers.

The best part of the hospital for me, was the big canteen. My father used to take me there to buy all sorts of delicacies like chocolate and canned food stuffs, such as garden peas, pears, condensed or evaporated milk and Kraft-K cheese, baked beans and so on. The chocolate tasted bitter.

Villagers in our Senjam-Chirang, were intermittently reminded of the war by Indian troops patrolling, apparently looking for Japanese soldiers. Sometimes, Gurkhas in armoured cars patrolled through the village. At times, Indian Army officers would come to the village to shoot birds from the trees. Some British officer on a motorbike, sometimes came to enquire if there was any problem with stray soldiers. Once there were about a dozen Chinese soldiers traipsing through the village in a surreptitious manner.

Just outside our village, at a grazing field, there was a small British radar station with the personnel wearing British Khaki Air Force uniforms. Life in our village otherwise, was tranquil and undisturbed by the war that was being fought elsewhere around other villages both in the plain and the hills.

Life trudged along at a snail's pace. It was mind-numbing and humdrum except for peripatetic show business Meitei men and women, such as

magicians and circus troupes, who were constantly arriving to entertain the war weary villagers. There was a very famous magician at Keisampat.

I enjoyed going out with slightly older boys from the village to tend cows in the pastures and coming back riding on the back of a buffalo along with other boys. There was no schooling. Rather, we boys went out swimming naked in small ponds outside the village and tending cows. We often went out at night to have a picnic in a vacant paddy field, cooking rice inside cut-out bamboo stalks with burning straw.

As I grew a bit older, I became more inquisitive. I began to follow adult villagers to see how they ploughed the field. I watched how men and women transplanted rice seedlings from a nursery into a previously flooded field, which was banked with low mud walls.

I often went to see how villagers, men, and women, harvested the paddy in the months of September-October, when the kernels of the paddy turned golden-brown. I saw how they separated the paddy grains from the stalks by threshing with three-pronged wooden hay forks. And how they winnowed small quantities of the grains at a time in a shallow round basket (yangkok) made of bamboo strips.

Once done, they would fill standard size gunny bags each of which held one Sangbai-full (30kg) of paddy, of which 14 Sangbai-full per Pari (one hectare) would be delivered to the owners of the paddy fields while keeping the rest of the produce for themselves.

Once the harvesting was over, they gathered the paddy stalks in bundles, which were left to dry in the sun in a heap for many weeks before being loaded onto bullock carts as hay for home consumption by their cattle, and for sale to some people in Imphal as fodder for cows which were kept for milk. Some poor people in Imphal would buy the straw as fuel for cooking food.

Our village like any other, had no dispensary or police station. People treated themselves with indigenous medicine of some sort. Thieving, burglary, and crime were rare as everybody knew everybody. Babies of pregnant women were delivered by indigenous midwives. Unlike other villages in India, every family had a house and *ingkhoh* as well as space for kitchen gardening. They were self-sufficient.

My life in the village continued until early 1945 when the Japanese came to an end, though not completely in Manipur. My eldest brother Gokulchandra, a civil engineer, had to return to Imphal as the state Public Works Department (PWD) had begun to function temporarily, with Khomdram Angangjao as the Head of the Department. He used his *awang shangoi* in his *ingkhoh* at Tera Keithel, as the office.

As our home at Uripok was still occupied by military personnel, my brother had to stay with a Brahmin family at Bamon Leikai. He also took me to Imphal for schooling. I was admitted to class IV at Moirangkhom Upper Primary School, as I mentioned earlier.

In early 1946, our family returned home at Uripok. My brother and I also went home. There were still a few Indian Army units occupying a few houses in the neighbourhood. I was still unsettled about my life. It is difficult to explain. There was still a sense of void and the shadow of the war prevailing around our home. Many houses around our home had been destroyed by the war and that delayed the return of the householders as they had to build new houses.

There was a very unrealistic feeling altogether. It was the celebration of Indian independence on August 15, 1947, that settled the restlessness of my mind somehow. Perhaps it was a reassurance that all was well. Life in Imphal town was back to normal though there were many reminders of the War-torn Imphal.

The independence of India - the 'Jewel in the Crown', led to freedom of other Afro-Asian countries in the British Empire, in a domino effect.

Britain, bankrupt by WWII, lacked the will to maintain its empire. Churchill was thrown out by the electorate and Clement Atlee was elected as the Prime Minister from the Labour Party in 1945. Atlee granted Indian independence and concentrated on improving the economy and health care of the working-class British people.

During the height of the War, the political system in Manipur showed no visible effect on the daily life of Meiteis. There were no social elites. Nobody cared two hoots for Bodhchandra Maharaj. Nor were there any stringencies of the religion dictated by the Brahma Sabha. The Maharaja's rule was no more pervasive, evocative, or adjudicative while the general resources for living were scaffolded. Meitei society became egalitarian.

In the immediate post war period, there was an imperceptible change in the Meitei socio-political thinking among the literate. There was an awakening of a subtle change towards democracy.

There was also marked cultural change because of economic development in Manipur, though not as noticeably as in other parts of the world, following WWII. It was a period of the beginning of economic growth and nascent liberalism – an idea of liberty, and consciousness about education and health. WWII is credited with bringing America out of the Great Depression.

The hyperinflation of the Indian rupee during the War, while strategically causing famine in Bengal, had a beneficial effect on the paltry Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Manipur. With the money they earned during the War, many Meiteis after the end of the war, were able to buy plots of land and construct brick buildings on the bombed-out sites that previously belonged to Marwaris at Khwairamband Bazaar. Quite a few began to take up commercial activities.

As a result, many business enterprises sprang up, though on a small scale. People were able to buy salvaged automobiles and had enough

money to buy petrol to run them. Almost every family had a bicycle. People were better dressed and happier. In general, there was a higher standard of living.

Many were able to fly out to Calcutta for holiday or business. The fare was affordable, and the flight time was very short. You could reach Calcutta in four hours rather than two days. More parents were able to send their children to colleges, further than nearby Gauhati, to Calcutta and as far as Allahabad. I went to Bombay.

There was a rapid paradigm shift – a fundamental change in approach to life. It was something almost providential in changing the face of Imphal through the vagaries of history. The War opened the eyes of Manipuris after a long nap, like Rip Van Winkle, who woke up after falling asleep for 20 years.

The awakening was partly due to the foresight and prudence of Mr Gimson, the Political Agent during the War. With his experience of the second Nupilan, he refused to renew the deeds (*patta*) of the Marwaris at Khwairamband Bazaar in Imphal, which was in the British Reserve. Only a few very old Marwari families, such as Kasturichand, were allowed to return.

Otherwise, with their inborn expertise in business and kindred connections elsewhere in India, the Marwaris would have monopolised the trade in Manipur. Still, I feel some of these Marwaris, deserve our praise. I met Kasturichand a few times, visiting him as a doctor at his home, a huge mansion at Awang Dukan. They made modern commodities available in Imphal in those days when Meiteis could not see further than their noses.

Though devastation during WWII was almost incalculable, technological inventions flourished in the West, and Japan in the East, during WWII. The Japanlan was also a page turner in the history books of Manipur.

Following the Japanlan there are hundreds of Manipuris living in the UK as they are in many other countries all over the world.

Personally, without Japanlan I might not have come to London and married an English woman. Change and evolution are inevitable in the world, whether expected or unexpected. It is part of life.