



Engelei

# Part 18

## 'Living Dangerously'

### Drastic changes in Meitei Society

### Post Japan Lan



Author and jeep 1964, assembled in 1948 from the WWII salvage depots.

Unthinkable before Japanlan

I have borrowed the famous phrase 'Living dangerously' for myself, from the German philosopher Nietzsche (1844-1900). He challenges us to live dangerously. He says this is the secret to finding fulfilment in life.

Perhaps, this is true in my case, though I use the phrase with a sense of levity. It may sound like I was an adventurous person going out on a limb. Hardly. I was just foolhardy, and like everybody else, I had to have attitude as I grew up. Often, I lucked it out.

Now that I am getting too long in the tooth, I have come to realise that I did have an attitude - a confrontational one that was far from being pleasant.

I had developed it when I was about 14 years of age. It was my obduracy. Unwilling to change my stance without good reasons. As I had developed it so early, it must have been an inherited disposition. My father was not aware of this attitude at about this age and thus, I was often at the receiving end of his punishment. As my mother put it: "Your father is much stronger than you." Later, he did come to know about it.

I had also acquired another demeanour which I had picked up from experience. It was that I was not to be bullied and that I was no more to be timid. In the years to come, this outlook set me off to live 'dangerously'. By dangerously I mean, I tried to be man enough to dare. By the age of 15 or 16, I began to sail close to the wind. Soon I became confrontational and often went the whole hog to a brawl of all sorts.



Author in 1946 inside the compound of Old Johnstone High English School.  
On his (R) side & across the wall is Ima Keithel



IMA KEITHEL (Maxwell Bazaar), Now Thangal Bazaar

The Japanlan was over and done by 1946 in Imphal. WWII ended in the East when the Japanese surrendered to the Allied forces on September 2, 1945, on the USS battleship in Tokyo Bay. World War II that started on September 1, 1939, in the West, stopped on May 7, 1945, about four months earlier than in the East, when the Germans (Axis Power that consisted of Germany, Italy and Japan) surrendered to the Allied Forces at Reims, in Northern France.

The cost of human lives in World War II (1939-1945) stretched over 70 million people (25 times the population of Manipur). Paradoxically, more civilians than soldiers were killed. A deliberate British bombing of civilians in the German city of Dresden to intimidate the Germans in 1945 alone, killed an estimated 30,000 civilians.

We were lucky in Manipur. Death because of the war in Manipur was negligible. I was also lucky. I survived malaria that I would not have got without the Japanlan, while many succumbed to it.

The hallmark about the British Empire that I see, was its knack of getting natives to fight each other for Britain. There were only 20,000 British officers and troops in all in India. And they ruled over 300 million Indians. It was quite a feat, I would think. In Manipur, only 4 or 5 British

officers and a Gurkha Battalion of about 600 troopers ruled over Manipur with a population of four and a half lakhs (4, 45606 in 1931 census).

Likewise, the newly formed 14<sup>th</sup> Army by General Slim that successfully fought the Japanese, consisted mostly of Indians and a few others from Commonwealth countries (Africa) and the Gurkhas from Nepal. It peaked at about 1,000,000.

In WWII, 2.5 million volunteer Indians fought for the Empire. Mahatma Gandhi helped the British in recruiting Indians for WWII. He said, 'Home Rule without military power was useless, and this was the best opportunity to get it.'

By August 1947 when India got Independence, life in Imphal town centre was still a bit eerie as Ima Keithel was not yet fully established. The bombed-out town centre was not rebuilt. There was hardly anybody living around our homestead. A few neighbours had not returned as their houses had been destroyed during the war. I had no friends in my neighbourhood or in school at Moirangkhom.

I cycled to school at Moirangkhom every day through Khwairamband Keithel on the main road. It was rare to find any other cyclists at times. The year was still 1946. As there were no boys of my age around, I made friends with older boys who lived around *lalambung makhong* in the interior of Uripok area in Imphal, who attended High schools. They treated me as an *angang* (young boy).

It is a nostalgic kitsch. I felt grown up among them. My association with them was through a senior boy *Chanambam Nodiachand*, who lived in a two-story house (Dolan) made of timber and roofed with corrugated Iron sheets. It was in the block in front of our homestead. His father earned his living as a watchmaker.

These senior boys were members of Uripok 'Boys Scouts', named *Swadesh Seva Dal*. It was great that I was allowed to become a member of this Boys' Scout', having been refused at first, as I was too young. I was very keen to join the Scouts and so I bribed a few seniors with two rupees. Now I could go with them to Baruni hill or Nongmaiching, on the annual *Baruni Chingkaba Numit*, the traditional day when young boys and girls climb to the top of the Baruni hill, once a year to pay homage to an icon of Mahadev.

This annual scramble up the mountain was one of the most exciting things for a young Meitei teenage, boy or girl. This was made more exciting by Dr Kamal's novel *Madhabi*. It was a very romantic thing for those who were in love. For this excursion there were three or four scout groups from Imphal that acted as pathfinders along the unmade mountain path through dense forest and ravines, ahead of the mass scaling the next night.

Our Uripok scout group like others, would clamber up the hill one day ahead. Each team was mutually assigned a stretch of the narrow and risky footpath that zig-zagged to the top of Baruni ching. Our job was to make the climb that would begin the next night in the dark, safe and less risky. We had our training as boy scouts for days beforehand.

Our scout party was led by an adult, Moirangthem Gojendra Singh from Uripok, who lived across the road from our house. We had the usual Boys Scout uniform of khaki shorts and shirts with epaulets, baseball cap and neckerchief around our neck, the two ends of which were knotted in front.

We had regular drills for discipline and learnt scout laws. We learnt hand signals, how to measure the height of a tree and how to tie a knot with ropes. We learnt field work including first aid. One type of a knot I learnt was a reef knot which has become very useful late in my life here. The three-finger scout salute was explained by Gojendra. The three fingers

represented: (1) honour of God and King (British king), (2) help others and (3) obey Scout law. We avoided the king bit.



My dear friend Moirangthem Gojendra Singh [April 22, 1922 – July 20, 1993].

Gojendra was a remarkable man. His study for I.A. at Jagannath Baruah College, Jorhat in Assam, was interrupted by the bombing of Imphal in May 1942. He returned home from college in his summer vacation. He always had a perfect gentlemanly demeanour and never lost his cool. He was fluent not only in English but also in Bengali and Hindi. In the beginning of the Japanlan, he worked as a clerk for an Indian Army unit near Palel.

He was one of the first students who graduated from the newly established DM College in Imphal. He did his MA and LL B from Calcutta. Over the years he climbed the various rungs of the promotional ladder in government posts in Manipur. He retired as Director of the Local Self-Government and the Urban Development in 1983.

Scaling the Baruni Hill, situated in the east of Imphal valley, is an ancient tradition for Meitei youth. It is like a rite of passage in that, teenage boys and girls clamber up to the top of the hill, to give homage to the deity Nongpok Ningthou – an indigenous iconic Meitei Lai, now replaced by Hindu Shiv.



Baruni Hills (Credit: You Tube).

It was customary for the pilgrims to have a holy dip in the sacred waters of Chinggoi stream (chingoiluppa) at its foothills before they began to climb. It was meant to cleanse and purify their soul. This has been a pre-Hindu ritual for Meiteis. The ritual was a very beguiling event in the life of Meitei youth.

Dr Kamal's book Madhabi created a thrilling adventure about Baruni chingkaba which falls in the Meitei month of Lamda (February-March) every year after Yaoshang. We youngsters used to wait for this exiting day.



Symbolic representation of Nongpok Ningthou on top of Baruni Hill.  
(Photo Credit: E-Pao).

It was a very exciting event for teenage boys and girls, who were attracted to each other with desires and dreams, to get physically close and share a thrilling adventure of a lifetime. It carried a sense of adventure with a hint of danger involved in traipsing up the hill in the pitch darkness of the night. I could not wait for it even in my early teens.

Teenage is the time for tracking emotions and arousing stimuli in the environment. In those days, it was taboo for a girl to be seen in the company of a boy. Romance was a hush-hush affair, risk-taking at the best of times. Sometimes, such a romantic boy might end up being smacked by the girl's elder brother.

Romance between the starry-eyed boys and girls was epistolary, scribbling sweet nothings on a piece of paper in broken Manipuri and delivered by a third person. We all grew out of it as we got older. Meiteis had strange cultures. They fought shy of speaking English among themselves. It was considered supercilious. It thus impeded their fluency of speaking English.

Tribal people on the other hand, had no such inhibitions and so, they spoke English with better inflection than Meiteis. Not anymore since the private preparatory schools came into vogue. Surprisingly, our thick-accent has disappeared, in the way Germans have lost their thick-accent or, back of the tongue accent, rather than tip of the tongue accent.

Wearing a tie with suit was another proscription. A young man with a tie at Khwairamband Bazaar could be beaten up by a gang of boys. I was one of the very few boys who risked wearing a tie, as I studied mostly outside Manipur.

By the time almost all schoolboys started wearing shoes after the Japanlan, the girls were wary of wearing shoes while walking to and from schools. Even the more forward students of Tamphasana high



School, flinched from wearing any footwear. Everyone walked barefoot in the summer heat or the freezing winter. It was like sacrilege.

About this time in Imphal, as I was growing up in my early teens, I became sick as a parrot of being the ever-cowering rich boy. Whenever I looked at my face in the photograph of the Scout group taken in 1947 (cf. Part 6), I stared into the face of a softy. His name was mine and his face seemed distantly related to me. Now, I honour the courage he didn't know he had. As John Keats, the romantic English poet, wrote: "Too long a sacrifice can make stone of the heart."

I did not realise then, teenage years are the time for rapid changes in personality with potential implications, and age 14 is known as risk-taking peak. Coincidentally, at my age of 14, I decided to toughen myself by self-instilling some moral courage to stand up to bully boys, despite my timorous look and spare physical build. Many boys soon came to know that looks are not what they seem.

I ordered a three-strand chest expander from Calcutta, after reading Charles Atlas in an American magazine. I thought I would improve my chest muscles. I also needed to put on some weight. I started drinking a glass of egg flip, which was a raw egg in warm milk every day. After a few months, nothing had happened. So, I gave them up as a bad joke. I didn't realise then; I am genetically flat-chested. So were my brothers.

In the months and years that followed, I became quite tough as iron entered my soul. I morphed into a no-nonsense boy with an ability to confront any misdemeanour from any unsavoury guy, either deliberate or perceived. I became very confrontational – a bad behavioural trait. The practice would not stop until I have finished dealing with it. I became quite finicky. I often lucked it out and went the whole hog, finishing with a brawl.

I sailed through my college life with fewer skirmishes, and much less during my professional life. However, I did have two or three near misses from being locked up in jail.

Some readers might find it quite extraordinary that I carried a pocket-sized semi-automatic pistol in my right hip pocket as a doctor in Imphal, even when I was doing ward rounds in the hospital. It was because I heard rumours that some boy or the other wanted to beat me up. The straw that broke the camel's back was when my eldest brother Gokulchandra also warned me about it one day.

I was not going to be beaten up or shamed in Imphal where everybody knew me. With nonchalance I applied for a handgun licence. As soon as I got the license, I flew to Calcutta and bought a semi-automatic pistol from a shop at Bentick Street in front of the Raj Bhavan.

It was not that I could kill anybody with the gun but that, I felt safe with it in my pocket. I moved around without any shred of fear. So, I very much remained in the saddle. Old habits die hard, and I thought I shook myself free, but not yet.

All my 11 years, while travelling alone as an adult student, outside of Manipur, I always carried a 5-inch flick-knife in my right-side trouser pocket for personal safety.

Talking about this handgun. It became useful to steady my nerves when, once in my lifetime, I was in mortal danger, or so I thought. After I was transferred to Churachandpur, one chilly and wintry night, I was going back to Churachandpur from Imphal at about 9 pm, riding my Vespa



My Vespa scooter in our drive at home at Uripok.

scooter, along Imphal to Churachandpur Road that covered 62 km and the last part of it was through jungle.



A photo opportunity with my old semiautomatic pistol in November 2019 in Imphal at the request of Shanti Moirangthem.

Before I reached Nambol, a few villagers, both men and women were fishing by the main Tiddim Road, sitting by the roadside with their backs to the road. They had hurricane lamps. I was doing about 40 km an hour, when one elderly woman who did not see my headlight, suddenly got

up and crossed the road in front of my scooter. There was a crash. Both of us fell on the road.

The woman got up quickly with no visible injury. I also got up uninjured. Then I was immediately surrounded by about twenty local people. After about ten long minutes, I was frogmarched to a village about 500 metres away from the road and across the harvested paddy field. I trudged awkwardly, on the low narrow mud walls of the paddy fields.

During this arduous but quiet journey, one of the captors gave me a hint of the danger that possibly lay ahead for me. He mentioned, probably to hoodwink me or to terrify me that, it was only a couple of months ago, a Mayang man, driving a car, ran over another villager on the road. Luckily, he survived the thrashing as it was during the daytime, with a lot of traffic on the road. It had no effect on me. I was on one way tract of how to fight it out.

We eventually arrived in the village, and I was told to sit on a mora (bamboo stool) in the mangol of a house. I was left alone with a hurricane lamp. In retrospect, I am surprised that I had no fear. Perhaps the hormone adrenalin was surging in my blood for a fight-or-flight response. I was calm thought not collected. I cannot remember if my heart was pounding.

It was a testing time for my courage. In my solitude, which unlike "The solitude of Alexander Selkirk" I was not the monarch of all I surveyed. The solitude, however, gave me time to ponder about the chances of my survival.

With seven rounds in my pistol and six in the revolver, many of which would miss the target at long range, and the muddy terrain that would tie me down, I realised my escape was neigh impossible. I came to the conclusion that my chances of escape were nought. I did have a plan of of engaging the hostiles, calmly and without alarm just in case.

I relaxed and waited for what they had to say. While I was making my mental preparation, I loaded a round in the chamber of my automatic that I had put in the right-hand pocket of my overcoat while walking to the village, without them seeing it. I pushed the safety latch to lock. I left the revolver in the front left hand breast pocket as it was. Then I coolly awaited my impending doom.

After what appeared to be ages, three or four men came back. They said I could go if I paid some money for the injury suffered by the woman. Come to think of it, the collision was not really my fault. Luckily, it was my payday. I took out 50 rupees from my wallet and handed them to one of the men, which was accepted. For reference, my monthly pay then, was less than ₹ 500. I brought hundred rupees and left the rest at home.

I schlepped back to the main road in pitch darkness, across the barren paddy fields, as fast as my legs could carry me. A flash of fear seared through me then, as adrenaline in the blood had subsided. I wanted to reach the safety of the main road and my scooter before they changed their mind. I picked up my Vespa and rode back home to Imphal as it was nearer than to Churachandpur. The scooter had only a twisted handlebar.

Though the incident was not part of my living dangerously, it showed the state of my conditioned attitude to danger, which I experienced, though not for the first time. That was 1965.

My combative temperament was relentless while practising in the UK as well. Confrontations went on with rowdy young people, who would come and swear at me. My younger partner, an Indian Punjabi was beaten three times by patients.

Unusually though, I had a bodyguard at my beck and call, to deal with rowdy and abusive patients, who were mostly young Pakistani boys who had a chip on their shoulder. They knew doctors would not hit them as

it was against the code of medical practitioners' conduct. Any such positive action would entail the doctor being struck off the Register of the General Medical Council immediately.

Despite using a proxy to fight for me, I did challenge a couple or so for a fight sometime, but not in the context of a doctor and patient relationship. Luckily, it fizzled out from their side.

Now, fast rewind after this bit of digression about myself. Back to the late 1948 in Imphal. In those post war years, Meitei men and women in Imphal, who were still feeling the mud between their toes, began to struggle for a radical change in their way of life.

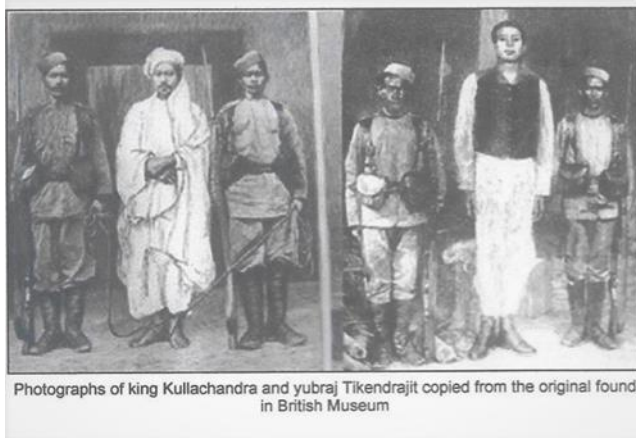
It first became manifest in the fashion wear. It was followed by food habits and a generally relaxed attitude to life and religion. They became more outgoing with a desire to bring variety to their lives. Variety is the very spice of life, that gives it all its flavour, wrote William Cowper in his poem *The Task* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They became more tolerant and secular.

This extroversion of Meiteis were the equivalent of peeling onions, removing the unpalatable coverings, and unearthing the new generations of hope and glory. The outwardly tranquil face of the Meitei social fabric belied the deep soul-swelling awakening of modernity.

Many literary paterfamilias began to riposte to common social and cultural topics. There was a passionate engagement and willingness among parents to fight for their children's higher education.

The Japanlan was the best thing that had happened to Manipur. It had helped Manipuris to discover the world without having to traverse the globe. Their peripatetic imagination took them to places far away from their limited world of Manipur, cloistered by nine mountain ranges.

It was a great turning point for the townspeople of Imphal with their unflagging pride that traced its roots to Ibudhou Pakhangba, back in 33 CE. The wartime experience began to energise social mobility among them with aspirations for a better quality of life for themselves and their children.



April 27 1891 was the end of Manipur's freedom, followed by the hanging of Prince Tikendrajit.

The independence of India in 1947, brought freedom to Manipuris and pulled down the curtain on the last show of the feudal system of monarchy in Manipur. The Meitei society until then, was vertically structured with stentorian dictates coming down from the king. It ended in 1949 when the princely states were merged with India thereby ending their ruling rights.

There was a Meitei social movement towards modifying traditional beliefs and cultures in accordance with modern ideas. The modern youth became disillusioned with organised religion and drifted towards secularism. I personally began to doubt the existence of a living powerful God. The trend though, ran opposite among the newly proselytised tribal Christian youth.

Among the Meiteis the tide of liberalism and relaxation in religious orthodoxy was beginning to rise. Muslims and tribal people were

received in Brahmin-run restaurants in the town centre and Meitei homes around the year 1947.

With this change in the worldview of Meiteis, there began a great yearning for higher education in Manipur. It thus dismissed as a staple of dystopian fiction what a British ethnographer once wrote that Manipuris abhorred education. With the opening of various High Schools, a new Arts College was founded in 1946 by a few university-educated Meiteis. Meiteis have never looked back since.

By 1947, many Manipuris had been educated outside and had seen quite a bit of India. They had seen what was going on in the lives and politics of non-Manipuri people. Back home they began to put politics into their heads and became involved. And, because they were novices they could not 'turn the pumpkin into a coach'. We all must start somewhere.

With the reconstruction of Imphal town centre, new buildings came up at the bombed-out ruins of pre-war Marwari buildings. It was an amusement to see a new untrained traffic policeman for the first time, directing the traffic from roofed police stand at the four-lane ends by the western gate of Kangla.

Imphal was full of vehicular traffic, more than any town in India. My eldest brother also had a jeep assembled, and I began to learn how to drive it. I wish I could paint a vivid picture of this sentimental touch of modernity and the emergence of a modern nation-state of Manipur. It was like the pleasure of seeing the daffodil buds opening the next day, which are symbols of new beginnings.

By 1949, with the coerced integration of Manipur to India, all the educated people began to nurture an interest in politics. Everybody, not aware of the forced but clandestine integration of Manipur to India, accepted Manipur as a normal part of India, as it has been since the subjugation by the British. Not only that, but also the main Congress



political party strived hard to demolish monarchy and integrate Manipur to India.

Meiteis by now, began to take interest in business. Even though Meiteis were not endowed with business acumen, they were learning the ropes of market economy. They opened shops, selling various items of goods and commodities that they brought from Gauhati and Calcutta.

Still, as the art of doing commercial business has not been ingrained in the Meitei social fabric, it took a long time for them to cotton on. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and commercial art is business.

There was a handful of Mayang traders, Marwaris, Biharis and Sikhs, who lived cheek by jowl at the Khwairamband Market with Meitei traders. They were better at providing certain commodities and food products, because of their ethnic connections outside of Manipur, which were beyond the remit of Meiteis. Things like Amul Butter, Brooke Bond tea, ironmongery, electrical goods, and various fabrics were available in Mayang shops.

It was worth the wait for Meiteis to wake up as the faintly golden new dawn had broken and the dark bar on the horizon became clear, bringing fresh hopes of prosperity. Meiteis had begun to embrace the modern way of thinking while keeping their old culture alive and thriving.

I am humorously reminded of George Bernard Shaw, who observed in his *Maxims for Revolutionaries*: “the reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

I am not sure in which category to place the Meiteis. But what is factual in my opinion is that Meiteis are now moving towards a sustainable and

equitable prosperity since the end of the Japanlan. So are the tribal communities.

Steering towards a better living experience and endowed with indomitable pluck and perseverance, a new generation both in the plain and hills is on the move on the road to progress. Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.

