



Engel

Part 19

Literate Meiteis' Literary Renaissance



Teachers and students of Ibotonsana Higher secondary School, Uripok.

With author and family in November 2022, where he presented a book describing the state of the LP school in 1941, before it progressed to the present high school.

It is not such a terminally stupid notion for me to say that the differentiation between peoples in terms of mindset, depends on the effects of education.

A mindset is a set of beliefs of how you see yourself and the world. Everybody is born with a certain amount of intelligence and a mindset. A child's intelligence is primarily inherited from parents and conditioned

by the environment as the child grows up. Intelligence is one's ability to acquire knowledge and skills and to apply them.

Psychologists have divided mindset into two: fixed mindset and growth mindset. An uneducated person tends to have a fixed mindset as his/her knowledge is limited, while an educated person's mindset grows as his/her wisdom expands.



Author, progressed from the LP school (mentioned above) with mud walls and clay floor, where he used to walk barefoot on Uripok Road, now riding a motorbike, post war, in Imphal town centre. Seen here in Imphal in 1955 (Final year B Sc student in Nainital) with his friend Dhiren from Kongba (also B Sc student in Delhi). During summer College holidays, after haircut in modern-looking barber's saloons (R) at Makha Dukan (Paona Bazaar). Newly constructed one storey buildings among the war-torn buildings.

An educated person is one who has been to college or university. A literate person is one who can read and write, but only short simple statement on his or her everyday life, and a bit of the world at large.

Educated people, because of their vast acquired knowledge, can think more logically than the uneducated and literate person. It, however, does not mean that an educated person is better than the uneducated.

We need knowledge for progress. Knowledge comes from education. The great Roman Empire was built by educated Romans.

Both the French and American revolutions were a product of Enlightenment thinking (18th century), while science largely remained subservient to religion. Science began to separate from religion in the last third of the 19th century, after the publication of Darwin's book on evolution – *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin's work shattered the Enlightenment dream of uniting man and nature within a perfectible, orderly system.

Meiteis remained uneducated except for a handful until after the Japanlan and therefore economic progress was very slow. It was only in 1946 when the first college for higher education, **Dhanamanjuri College of Arts** was established by the efforts of a few educated Meitei people. It is now, **Dhanamanjuri University**.



Presenting my book to Dr Rajmuhon, Vice Chancellor of Dhanamanjuri University.

Author with my niece Dr (Prof) Ranjana, Microbiologist at Regional Institute of Medical Science Imphal. First Medical College.

It has not escaped my notice that it was because of many well-read and knowledgeable people in the post war period, that Manipur became what it is today, and Imphal became a centre of learning and cultural

production. It is not like watching a favourite movie in high definition. It is authentic. It is happening.



Prof N Lokendra Singh, Vice Chancellor of Manipur University, receiving Author's Book, My Memoirs from 1941. Presented by the author and Ranjana Devi in November 2022.



Sri A Sukumar Singh, Principal, Johnstone Secondary School. Imphal. The oldest & most prestigious High School in Imphal. Estd in 1885 as a Middle School. Upgraded to a High School after a quarter of a century. Receiving author's book. November 2022.

The first University in Manipur, Manipur University, was established in 1980. By 2022 there are 9 Universities in Manipur. A very great leap in enlightenment, leading to for Meitei literary Renaissance. Historically, it is a rebirth of Meitei literature. Meiteis were educated in their own vernacular, and had literature both oral and Witten, from time in memory.



Author giving a short talk to the students of Churachandpur Medical College about human memory on November 28 2022.

Seated at the back is Prof S Iboyaima. First Director of the College. Estd with the first academic session beginning on October 25 2022.

Prof Iboyaima was chosen for his invaluable experience at the AIIMS in New Delhi for 23 years.



Dr Y Lakshimai Devi with author at her residence in Imphal
In November 2022.

She is One of the handful gynaecologist consultants of 1960s in the newly established Regional Medical College in Imphal.

Manipur now, has 4 medical colleges. It is a great achievement for a small state like Manipur. A tour de force.

Civilisation has arrived in Manipur. It is a fascinating window on the arrival of modern physical civilisation to Manipur because of higher education in the post war period.

Post war period was a time for activities in reawakening Manipuri literature. Literature is a method of transmitting knowledge. It cultivates wisdom and worldview. It was a time for beating the old system of inert culture for an adaptive culture that provided the mood and ambience for literary works, given the parameters of its function, such as increased public access to education, social, political, and economic changes.

The role the Japanese played by chance in Manipur, in the acculturation of new cultures, is bigger than the younger generations would realise. Because of the war, even I, as a small boy, knew so much about the world and its people when the vast majority of Meiteis had never seen

a train. It accrued from the experience of seeing so many things and meeting with different ethnic people, and their diverse mannerisms.

Meiteis could see then, there were so many things on offer in life and it was up to them to try to get them. The experience instilled in them aspirations for the better things in life. They became assiduous and scrupulous. It was a period of history and literature that teemed with energy and conflict and contradictory evaluations.

Inflected by changes in their mindset and their active commitment against the pull of passivity, the educated Meiteis became more determined. They plunged into a new world with enthusiasm of a new convert (into a religion) but without blindness.

There began a surge in literary translations of dramas, poetry, and prose from Bengali and Sanskrit to Manipuri, as well as creative writings that were typically fiction and poetry, displaying imagination. The literary atmosphere that was created by Bengali and Sanskrit literature writers, motivated a few people to be writers in Manipuri for their own satisfaction and to get response from readers. And they were influential in the resurgence of modern Manipuri literature.

About this time, the medium of teaching in schools was in Bengali, and Sanskrit was a compulsory subject. The creative works in some of these languages, were in a way, had romantic ethos for the budding Manipuri writers. It was like Captain Cooke's exploratory voyage was the basis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. We are familiar with his famous line: 'Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink'.

Whilst Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats wrote famous poems by following the path of mountaineering pioneers to the Alps. Likewise, Mary Shelley, wife of Shelley, drew on Arctic journals for her famous novel *Frankenstein*. Arctic is a North American premier scientific research journal. It is still going strong.

It is never too late to learn. It was only at the dawn of the 18th century, about the time of Meitei conversion to Hinduism when Western scientists agreed unanimously that the world was round. The English scientist Isaac Newton believed it bulged slightly at the equator.

The French astronomer Jacques Cassini thought it was spherical and pinched at the waist. It was only when Cassini sent a man to measure the equator's gravity with a pendulum, it was discovered that the gravitational pull was weaker there than in France, thus suggesting that the world did indeed, bulge in the middle.

As I trawl back through my fading memories, I find that Manipuri literature has been in existence for a long period, in oral and written forms. By literature I mean a collection of spoken and/or written material that is artistic with creative imagination, including fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama genres. However, this interpretation of ancient Manipuri literature is situational and constrained by the relative criteria of a particular Meitei culture at that time.

Talking of Meitei culture. I concur with an eminent American anthropologist (Hoebel 1972), who said, culture is an integrated system of learned behavioural patterns that are characteristic of members of society and not the result of biological inheritance. If we follow this definition, the present Meitei culture characteristically, is a learned pattern that evolved from the pre-war to post war periods.

Talking of Meitei literature. While there are more theories of what literature is, the simplest one I appreciate is 'a special kind of language that contrasts to the common language we use. But the more humorous one is what a Russian critic Roman Jakobson wrote: "Literature represents an organised violence committed on ordinary speech." In general, literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language and deviates systematically from everyday speech.

The first record of Meitei literature in Manipur was existent around 770 CE, with *Poireiton Khunthok* (the early settlement account of Poireiton), followed by *Nummti Kappaa* (Pre-Hindu mythologies), *Ningthouron Lambuba* (military prowess of Meitei kings), *Leithak Leikharon* (an account of the Meitei concept of the creation with gods and goddesses).

Cheitharol Kumbaba is a literary book that briefly chronicles the activities of Meitei kings, dating back to the first century CE, and beginning with Nongda Lairen Pakhangba. Another book is *Chakpa Khunda Khunthok* that tells the subjugation of smaller autochthone Kangba clan, which was eventually absorbed by the Pakhangba clan.

What can really be called refined prose Meitei literature, was the publication of *Nungbaan Pombi Luwaoba* in the 16th century. It is a narrative of the intense love of Luwaoba for his wife Koubaron, which forced the gods to restore her life.

Some of the comparatively ancient Manipuri literature that I have come across, is in the form of prose poetry or ballad. A ballad is a popular narrative song passed down orally. They are exquisitely arty and creative, such as Ibemni's *Khongjom Parva* (Khongjom ballad).

As these literary works are old classics. I never knew their authors. A few of these works were cited in previous episodes. There are two more of them. Their euphonic sound never fails to make me sentimental with feelings of tenderness, sadness, and nostalgia. They are:

(1) *chekla paikharabana pombi hanjillakpada,*
cheklagi kaidongpham khangdraduna
pombi kakngao-naredo [...]

In English: A bird flew away (from its nest), when it returned, as it could not find its nest (presumably destroyed) the bird became utterly confounded.

(2) *mamang leikai thambal satle, khoimuna ille khoilaba,*

*shabi lao lao chatsilao, kalakpa yammi kanjaoba yammi,
mangda tharolao [..]*

In English: Lotuses are blooming in the eastern neighbourhood; black male bumble bees are humming around them. Come, come my dear, there are many green-eyed and spiteful people. Do step in and walk in front of me.

To recap. Modern Manipuri literature began to surface in the early part of the 20th century, thanks to a gallery of liberal young Meitei men with a yearning for modernism, who were engaged in advancing the knowledge to students.

They were those who had higher education outside Manipur, such as Cotton College Gauhati, Murari Chand College Sylhet, Presidency College Calcutta, Ashutosh College Dacca. The British developed Dacca (Dhaka) as a westernised educational hub before Calcutta, such as Ashutosh Engineering College, where my father and eldest brother went to study.

The official use of Manipuri language, however, began after the minor Raja Chandrakirti was handed the throne of Manipur on May 15, 1907. The Political Agent, Lt Col St Patrick Maxwell, the consort of Princess Sanatombi, was the Regent. During this period (1850-1928) known as 'under British management', the government *parwana* (Urdu=notifications) were issued in Manipuri. That was the real beginning of refined modern Manipuri language.

Serious attempts have been made in the 1920s to get Manipuri recognised as a vernacular for the *Prabeshika* (Bengali = matriculation) for Calcutta University, by a few educated Meiteis. These pioneers put their shoulders to the wheel and after years of hard work, Manipuri was recognised as a vernacular subject by Calcutta University in 1924.

When I was studying in class V at Johnstone High School in 1946, a few teachers such as Khwairakpam Chaoba and others used to tell us what they had to do for it. Writing poems and proses.



Khwairakpam Chaoba.



Engelei flower.

Which brings me to the most unforgettable bit of classic literature in poetic genre, written by Kh Chaoba. It has passed down the generations and remains as fresh as ever, since it has been composed into music and sung by many modern young girl artists such as Mangka. It is elemental and earthy:

*Chingda satpi engelei, chinnadana kenkhiba,
ho kalakida, ho kalakida!*

*Eina kenge kendedo,
malangbana humbagi ho kenbani, ho kenbanida.*

*Malangba eisu keidoude, leirangna leikhok loibagi
ho kenbani, ho kenbani- ne.*

In English: 'O' Engelei (*Pink periwinkle, Nithakalyani in Hindi*), I am green with envy that you blossom in the hills and drop off without having a chance to decorate the hair.

[Engelei] It's not my wish to fall off. It's the gentle wind that blows me off. [Wind] I, zephyr, am not entirely responsible. It is because the blossom is wobbly at its peduncle. That's why it disintegrates.

Newer forms of Manipuri literature, as above that was not influenced by Bengali and Sanskrit culture, emerged in the pre-war years.

Before that era, most Manipuri literature consisted of translations of religious texts and novels from Bengali and Sanskrit. It began with the translation of Mahabharata and Ramayana from Bengali and Sanskrit. Manipuri literature was heavily enhanced by loanwords that were borrowed from these two languages. It was a bit like the English language.

In the immediate pre and post war periods of WWII, there were quite a few religious books that were translated from Bengali or Sanskrit to Manipuri, such as an abridged Ramayana by Gokul Shastri (1890); an abridged Mahabharata by Gokul Shastri (1900); Bhagavad Purana by Phurailtpam Atombapu Sharma; Bhagavad Gita by Kalachand Shastri, Meghanandvadh from Michael Madhusudan's Bengali poem by H Nabadwip Singh, Shreegeeta by Khumanthem Gourakishore; and Shrimadbhagabad Gita by Shitaljit and Kalachand Shastri.

My father Irengbam Gulamjat Singh (1896-1992) also made some contributions to Manipuri literature. His books, such as Radhakrishna Premkali, Shreegobinda Leela Amrita, Geetgovnida by Jayadeva in Sanskrit, Shree-Shree Radh-Goinda anina Golak Dhamda Lengkhiba, as well as translation in Manipuri of Bengali lyrics of songs for Ras Leela Dances.

His prose-poetry were carefully structured, using Manipuri words for rhetorical effect with distinctive qualities.



Kh Gourakishor Singh.

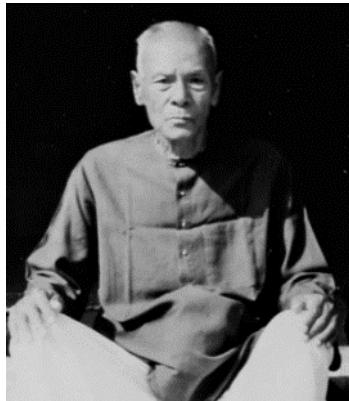
Besides, he created his own style of prosody and meter, called *Padya Chanda* - a combination of lyrical and metric elements of poetry with idiomatic elements of prose. He was the first Manipuri to translate Bhakti Sankritan from Bengali to Manipuri. Its lyrics are now used in Sankritan songs in Ras Lila performances.

In the immediate prequel and sequel of Japanlan, the only prose literary books we knew, were Dr Kamal's Madhabi (1896-1951), Hijam Angamghal's Khamba Thoibi sheireng (1892-1943) and Hijam Irabot's Sita (1896-1951), Khwairakpam Chaoba's Labanga-Lata (1896-1950), Hawaibam Nabadwipchandra's poems, Tonulaijinglembi Kavya (1897-1946), and Ashangbam Mineketon's Meitei Upanyas (1906-1995). There will be others that I am not aware of.

This early prose literature consisted of deeply complacent themes on romantic love, fettered by the convention of time, and Meitei national identity, so lovingly adumbrated by Dr Kamal in his Madhabi (1930). Dr Kamal was an innovator of writing novels in Manipuri.

In Madhabi, he wrote titillating stories of romantic love and sacrifice. He had the aesthetic ability to remould his words to suit his own personal

style of writing. He transformed Canchipur as a dreamy exotic landscape as in Homer's *Odyssey*. I think Kamal is the father of medieval Manipuri literature.



Irengbam Gulamjat Singh.

His poems: *Kanchipurgi lemhouba Makhak* and *Chandranadi* resonate with alluring images of Canchipur. Some of Kamal's poems are beautiful and appealing, as in this extract from a poem in *Madhabi*, which draws tears of sympathy from the readers:

*chakliba lammei athappa chingda,
mutchakhiniko mathannata,
ahing tanglou thengjillaktuna taraklaga nongdon liklana.
Lammeidi lakanungda chakpa, hengatlakle meichak phaba.*

In English: The wildfire that is raging in the faraway hill will douse itself with late-night dewdrops that will fall from heaven. But the flame of love that is burning wild in my heart has increased in ferocity.

Kamal's contemporary, Khwairakpam Chaoba, also wrote melancholic poetry (elegy), being sorry for himself, such as *Chingda satpi engelei* and *Thainagi Leirang*. Chaoba was a teacher at Johnstone High School. He taught us that one should write a poem with one's emotions; not just make it up and not just include emotions, but to describe your emotions. He like Charles Dickens, recast Manipuri literature and gave it a new face, single-handedly.



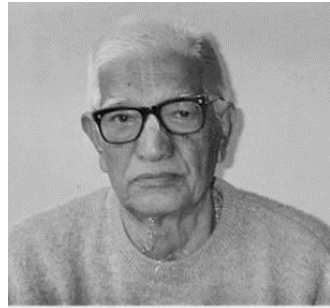
L Kamal Singh.



H Irabot Singh.



A Mineketan Singh.



RK Shitaljit Singh.

Among the modern writers, Ashangbam Mineketan, was one of the rare high-profile scholars of Manipuri literature. He emphasised the utopian root of Meitei literature. At my time, he was known to have his own poetical style, using a lot of archaic Manipuri words. He published many books and papers and was a recipient of many prestigious awards.

I believe he is regarded as the founder of Modern Manipuri literature. I am inclined to agree. Though he was only a graduate he was the earliest professor of Manipuri language and literature at the newly built DM College. Kalachand Shastri, Shitaljit and Mineketan were also my teachers at Johnstone High School.

Among the modern literary sleuths, MK Binodini Devi does not need introduction. Her literary device is the use of Manipuri words and phrases that bring in feeling to the words' usual meaning.

Binodini's writings are always distinguishable by being creative with a comfortable flow of words and with a logical structure of syntax. She was one of the most deliberate and assiduous neologiser of 20th century Manipuri. I knew Binodini quite well.

I last met the great lady when she came to our house to offer my father her condolences on the death of my mother in June 1990. I have read most of her books including a few that she presented to me on July 17, 1992, such as *ashangba Nongjabee* (1967), *nungngairakta Chandramukhi* (1967) and *Churachand Maharaj gi emung* (2008). The last one is the most enjoyable as it uncovers unknown stories of history.



MK Binodini Devi. Par excellence.

There have been many modern writers of literature in Manipuri, but as I have been living in the UK for over half a century, I have been familiar with only a very few of them. Out of them I feel privileged to mention only two, who were my contemporaries and close friends.

One is Leimapokpam Damodar Singh (1934- 2011). He wrote: *Manipuri Leela Macha* (1975) and *Manipuri wari macha* (1992). We had very good times together in our school days in Imphal and college days in Calcutta. He gave me two of his books: *Dr L Kamal Singh* (2000), and *Aspects of Manipuri Literature* (2008). His literary criticism of the works of many authors in these books, polishes their potentially unintelligible details, and rescues them from the ravages of history for all time.

He persuasively interprets complex texts to help students empathise with their works. Though the question remains of how he does, as a critic, claim to have godlike knowledge of the text that is denied to an average reader. Drawing an analogy, it can be asked how one can know the light in the refrigerator is off when the door is closed. It is because he could interpret what is logically constrained in the text itself.



L Damodar Singh



A Sharat Singh

Arambam Sharat Singh was a prolific poet, a renowned lyricist for many Manipuri songs. Sadly, he died very young, but he left a compilation of many poems in the book, *Sharat Arambamgi khomjinba leirengshing*.

The post war years were the spring of Meitei drama writers. Weekly drama performances at the Manipur Dramatic Union, Rupmahal and Aryan Theatres were always houseful. The price of a few rows of seats in the front was three rupees each, those at the back were one rupee each and in between two rupees. The MDU is the oldest. It was formed on March 23, 1931, by a few dedicated entrepreneurs, S Lalit, H Irabot, N Thanil, Ch Mayurdhwaja and Kh Dhanachandra.

The next that came into prominence as a drama hall, was Rupmahal Theatre in the town centre. It was built just after the War in 1948 and prior to that existed as an amateur drama group at Bamon Leikai during the War. It was established in 1943 at the residence of Laisram Netrajit. In 1945 I went to see a play at a shangoi. I remember the song: *pung pung Meitei pung, matam chadana chatpa pung*.

Another proscenium theatre – The Aryan Theatre at Sagolband, became prominent in the early 1950s. I believe it was first established in 1899 by Atombapu Sharma at his mandab at Sagolband.

There were many famous actors and actresses, such as Jadumani for MDU, Birendrakumar for Rupmahal and Birmangal for Aryan Theatre. Famed and attractive actresses were Bimola from Keisampat, Thambalangoubi from Nagamapal, Shapam Nupimacha and Tandon from Wangkei Leikai.

Following the Japanlan, Calcutta-printed national English newspapers, such as the Hindustan Times and the Statesman were available daily in Imphal because of daily flights from Calcutta to Imphal. Before that the Bengali Amrit Bazar Patrika and Jugantar Patrika were available through rather erratically. After the war a few local Manipuri dailies like Prajatantra and Poknapham gave local news and informed the public of wrongdoings.

Summing up. The Japanlan thoroughly transformed the general national character of Meitei youth in the post-war years. Those young people including me, who are now in our 80s, formed the first phalanx in a major character upheaval of Meiteis.

They defined a new Meitei culture by their personal experience that was focussed in the 1950s and 1960s. In academic historiography, they were influential in generating the modern youth culture in modern Manipur.

Thanks to Japanlan. Apart from the worldwide benefits of WWII with the invention of radar, computer, and mass production of penicillin, it created a large transformation of Meitei society.

Meiteis are on “The March for Progress” into better versions of our ancestors.

