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[Khongamelei]

## Chapter 1

# Beginning of Life in the UK



Author and his friends Omar Khan, a business tycoon drinking with our MP Gerry Sutcliffe at the Terrace Bar of Houses of Parliament, London, on the north bank of the river Thames. In the background is the famous Westminster Bridge across the Thames River, connecting east and west sides of London.

“The beginning is always today” – wrote Mary Shelley, the author of Frankenstein, published in 1818. She was only 18 years old when she began writing it. By that pithy aphorism, I believe, she meant - forget the past, and the present is the only opportunity given to anyone to make life-changing decisions.

The beginning of my life in the UK, was when I arrived in London in February 1966. It was the beginning of springtime in my life – a time for renewal and reawakening of my spirit with a fresh start. It was a time to break up my mundane everyday life in Churachandpur. I set off on what I believed to be a life enhancing course of a journey and for a triumphant return home.

This section about my life in the book, *My Memories of Imphal from 1941*, came into being after a bit of practice in writing 20 parts of my memoir about Imphal. It took me nearly two years. As Mark twain said: “In the first place, God made idiots. This was his practice. Then he made proof-readers.” I am now a proof-reader.

In fact, the inspiration came from my young friend Dr (Prof) Thangjam Premchand Singh from Keisampat. He sent me a WhatsApp message, asking me to write about my life and times in the UK. He knows about my early life in Imphal.



Professor (Dr) Premchand Singh MD.

It is quite difficult to craft compelling stories that leap off the pages while trying to give the reader a glimpse of my life and my experiences that came alive again, after more than half a century when God’s dog

was still a puppy. I am glad, by now, I have a bit more experience in writing. Mark Twain was right. And I am very grateful to Dr Premchand.

Dr Premchand was in London himself, for a couple of years, as one among the few young meritorious doctors who were sponsored by the Government of India for research studies. He is a distinguished specialist in Diabetes. He was a Professor of Medicine at RIMS in Imphal. He has been invited to a few international conferences, to present his papers on Diabetes that is ubiquitous in Manipur. But he was in London as a student. And he will not know the British way of life.

The incentive to come to London was closely related to my personality traits – not to be demeaned by anybody, and a desire to improve the standard of practice of medicine in Imphal and Manipur. I thought about it with utmost gravity. I did not live someone else's dream. I found my own.

As a story has a beginning, a middle and an end, I will begin my story with a very brief background of how and why I came to London. The middle part of the story of my life in the UK is nothing much out of the ordinary. It was only exciting in the beginning. Soon, the British way of life grew on me, and my life became as routine as it was in Imphal.

The last part of my life is still going on. I follow William Wordsworth's pearl of wisdom. He said, "The wise mind mourns less for what age takes away than what it leaves behind." Wordsworth with his friend Samuel Coleridge started the 'Romantic Age', also known as 'Age of Revolutions' in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.



Houses of Parliament with Big Ben Clock Tower.

Westminster Bridge over river Thames in the foreground.

(Pic Credit: Stock Royalty free image)

This narrative will thus, be a clumsy syntax of an average soundbite sociology – a short clip of my life in the UK, like everybody else. As space is of prime consideration, I will be fashioning my written short stories together with a few narrative photographs as visual short stories. Brevity is the soul of wit. (Shakespeare's Hamlet).

To tease out the shape of my story I will begin my account like a humble onion whose structure begins from the base of its stem with its fleshy leaves to the central bud at the tip of the stem. I have come to understand that Life is not full of roses. Nor is it full of thorns.

The recorded events of my new life in the UK are deliberately styled in a nonchronological order to pick out what I think, may be of interest to the readers. They do not follow the direct causality pattern of the events featured. They are only a few arresting experiences that are chosen at random as are the photographs for visual storytelling. In most anecdotes, I am looking back favourably on moments of my life that I wish to share with the readers in jocund company, like Shakespeare who wrote about 'jocund company of daffodils'.

For starters, I take great pleasure to begin my story with the boozy bars at the British Parliament, the mother of all parliaments in the world, which had been keeping 'the British pub culture' alive today.



Houses of Parliament in London. Low white thin canopies by the river Thames are the Terrace Bars.

The British bar or pub culture is an integral part of British life, especially student life. A pub (short for public house) is a drinking establishment licensed to serve alcoholic drinks for consumption on the premises. The pubs in Parliament, are there for social intercourse and to quench the thirst and jollification of the members of Parliament during the Parliament sessions. Sometimes, these alcoholic beverages help to make them pleasantly inebriate.

Historically and culturally, the Chancellor is the only one who is allowed to drink alcohol in the House of Parliament, during the annual budget speech. They usually drink Brandy. This year (July 2021) however, teetotaler Rishi Sunak [Indian Punjabi British] chose water over alcohol as he delivered his Budget speech to MPs in Parliament.

Ten years ago, my wife and I, with friends Omar and Naz, went to Parliament during the Prime Minister's 'question time' in the House of Commons, as guests of our MP, Gerry Sutcliffe. During a break, we went for a pint at the famous Terrace Bar of Parliament by the river Thames, known as the dirty old river.

The drinks, both alcohol and soft drinks were all paid for, having been put on the tab of our MP'S account. The drinks were subsidised and thus cheaper. It is calculated that the British taxpayers stump about £60,000 (₹ 5,796,146) a week to quench their MP's thirst and feed them.



Margaret & friend at the Terrace Bar of Parliament.

This Bar in the photo above, is called Terrace Bar as it is in the open, outside the Parliament Building, and on the bank of the river Thames. There are 30 bars in the building for the MPs and their guests. There are 650 Members of Parliament.

There are special whisky brands that are distilled only for the House of Lords and House of Commons. Visitors can buy them from the official shops there. In between day sessions, when bored, MPs can nip off to the bar, or drink all night during the night sessions. There are nine restaurants with simple and exotic menus, and all kinds of alcoholic and soft drinks.

The British Parliament is in the city of Westminster. London we know, has two cities: the City of Westminster, Britain's political and cultural centre, and the City of London that represents the economic heart of London. The latter is the area where you see men in pin-stripe suits with

black bowler hats and walking with folded umbrellas. These people used to speak English with a crisp accent (RP or Received Pronunciation). Not anymore.

Parliament is the heart and soul of the United Kingdom. Parliament is their Constitution. There are no written Constitution. There are two Houses of Parliament. The House of Lords and the House of Commons. However, since the 1998 Devolution Acts, some of its sovereign powers were delegated to Parliaments/Assemblies of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

In London there is a community of Englishmen – original Londoners who are known as Cockneys and who speak English with a funny accent, a rhyming slang of the working-class. There were a few of them in Manipur during the Japanlan. They used to live in the central heart of London's East-End and the Dockland area, where the poorest people lived. This is the part of London on which Charles Dickens based his story of Oliver Twist. Now, the poor Bangladeshis mostly from Sylhet, have replaced them.

Drinking alcohol is a big part of British culture. It is all about being sociable. Not that everybody drinks alcohol, though the vast majority including Royalty, does. I must say, it was the easiest British culture I could assimilate.

A word of warning. Anybody who drinks alcohol is bound to be drunk sometime or the other. British MPs are no exception. But culturally, if he/she is just drunk and is not disorderly, nobody minds. There are a lot of young boys and girls who do exactly the opposite at weekends, especially in many central city pubs, often ending in a 'pub crawl' and/or pub brawl. Newcastle tops the list.

A pub crawl is a visit to several pubs, one after the other, having a drink or drinks at each pub. I have done this a few times in my long life.



Prince Charles (Now King Charles III) enjoying a pint of English bitter (beer) in a pub. (Credit: Public Domain)

Axiological hedonism has the premise that only pleasure has worth or value. The following anecdote has such a pleasure. It is about the shenanigans that were exchanged between the Conservative Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the first female MP Lady Astor of Labour, during a Parliament session. Churchill was well known for drinking brandy all the time.

One day, during a heated debate, Lady Astor told the Prime Minister: “Winston, you are drunk. What’s more, you are disgustingly drunk.” Churchill who was very witty, replied: “My dear, you are ugly, and what’s more you are disgustingly ugly. But tomorrow I shall be sober, and you will still be ugly, what’s more you will be disgustingly ugly.” That put her in her place.

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Late Queen Elizabeth sipping her favourite Martini tippie.

(Credit: Public Domain)

Another hedonistic prank I remember from was from reading news was about Moraji Desai when he was Prime Minister of India. It was in 1977. Moraji became the talk of the world. He used to drink a glass of his own urine every morning. Urine is normally free of germs.

A BBC journalist went to interview him in Delhi about the benefits of drinking one's own urine. He asked why Moraji was drinking his own urine. Moraji assured him that it was for health reasons and long life.

The journalist then pointed out that Churchill drank brandy all the time and he was now 90 years old. Moraji not lost for words, replied: had he been drinking his own urine he would live to be 100. Churchill died at the age of 90; Moraji at 99.

The story I am going to write now is not just about my life in the UK but the British way of life as I first experienced for the first time, followed by a few anecdotes that I found interesting. They will be prefaced by a pen picture of the standard of medical care and lack of expertise in the medical profession in Imphal.

There was a period in the 1950s and 1960s when the standard of medical practice in Imphal was just elementary like everything else. Manipur, just after the Japanlan (1942-44), had a handful of doctors

with diplomas in Medicine (LMP = Licentiate Medical Practitioner). They had helped to save a lot of lives with their limited knowledge in medicine, which was their training.

There was no medical practice during the war years of 1942-1945. As I vaguely remember, Civil Hospital in Imphal, the only hospital in Manipur was functioning somehow in 1946. We could see it through the window of our classroom at Johnstone School.

There were no proper dispensaries in the villages and the hills. In the early 1950s, only one doctor with MBBS degree had arrived. He was Dr Nando Roy, whose father was also a doctor, Dr Bhorot Singh who had LMP diploma. He later, married the indomitable princess MK Binodini.

As Dr Nando had done his training in surgery as a house surgeon for six months as a trainee graduate in Calcutta, he soon became the surgeon in charge of the Civil Hospital in Imphal. Dr Karam Gopal (LMP), not a trained anaesthetist, was the hospital anaesthetist, using basic ether and chloroform anaesthesia. Between two of them, they saved a lot of lives and healed a lot of suffering.

In those 1950s, for more serious cases, a few Meiteis who could afford, would go to Dibrugarh Medical College. Those who could not afford, naturally would die. A few patients went to the Welsh Mission Hospital in Shillong for major operations. At that time, one Doctor Robert Hughes was quite well-known.

Many patients in Manipur, would also die in the hands of a *maiba* (indigenous doctor) who for example, would diagnose a person with abdominal swelling with fluid (Ascites) due to liver cirrhosis, as an encounter with a Lairen (Python). They would treat the patient with *Thou Toubu* (Propitiation of the evil spirits) as I mentioned somewhere earlier.

We Meiteis are stubbornly attached to religious rituals and propitiations to gods for healing the sick, such as Sani puja (worship of Saturn) far more than to our beliefs in a God. Those beliefs that ran counter to the 'worldview of modern medicine' were difficult to oppose, as it was the component of religion, both old and new.

After qualification I trained as a House Surgeon in Medicine, General surgery, and Obstetrics & Gynaecology in Delhi hospitals, I returned home in 1964 with a profusion of pride and prejudice. I was proficient in the practice of medicine and so I took charge of the male medical ward of Civil Hospital in Imphal, in the same way Dr Nando took over the surgical unit.

But it did not last long. "All good things must come to an end", wrote Geoffrey Chaucer in his poem *Troilus and Criseyde*. He meant 'enjoy yourself while you can'. It was not like that for me. I had not yet started my life.

With the imminent arrival of Dr Kumud and Dr Jogendra from London with their MRCP degrees, I opted to be transferred to Churachandpur, where I stayed just over a year before I came to London for my study in

postgraduate medicine cum work, with the grand ambition of improving the standard of practice in medicine in Imphal on my return. My outlook has changed by this time. When I went to medical college it was because I wanted to be well known in Imphal.

Paradoxically, I ended up living in the UK for the rest of my life. It was my fate if you believe in that sort of thing. Dante Alighieri, the Italian poet, famously said in his 'Inferno': "Do not be afraid: our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift." But I am no believer in supernatural powers or fate. But I believe in destiny which cannot be determined by decisions I will make. Destiny is about the present, where every decision an individual has made will lead them to their present scenario. That is, you reap as you sow. In Hinduism, it is called *Agami Karma*.

What inspired me was to recapitulate my destiny. Whether my life streamed from nothing to something I have done or from something I have done to nothing, and whether my own ethical antennae were blunted by leaving my own country and making England my home. I found the answer in the poem, *Mont Blanc* by Shelley. I have always been interested in English literature.

Only the first of the 5 stanzas of the poem are quoted here. It is followed with a critique by Michael O'Neill. Percy Shelley, who died very young (29) was fortunate that he was survived by his famous wife, Mary Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein* (1818), while also holidaying in a village by Lake Geneva in 1816. She made Shelley's work popular.

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters—with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume,  
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

[Percy Bysshe Shelley]

Mont Blanc is the tallest peak, 4,810m [Koubru Mountain in Manipur, 2,512m] in the Alps Mountains in Europe, which stretches from Italy through France to Switzerland. He wrote the poem in 1816 as an Ode, while travelling to Chamonix Valley in the French Alps, after holidaying by Lake Geneva in Switzerland.



Mont Blanc

(Photo Credit: Royalty free Stock image)

‘Ode’ is a lyrical poem with an outpouring of praise of an individual, an idea, or an event. English poets often use it with an emotive and literary language. Shelley was famous for his epic poem of Don Juan, a great womaniser.



An evening in the French Alps 2010 with friends.

Shelley says a ‘feeble brook’ is not simply a tributary to the ‘vast river’. Instead, the river is said to ‘burst and race’ over the brook’s rocks, thus introducing the question of whether a brook is still a brook when a river runs in its channel. He is talking about the changeability of the identity

of any individual entity. For the brook, in becoming part of the river, it loses its identity as a brook and transcends itself, gaining access to a forcefulness it never had as a 'feeble brook'. [Michael O'Neil].

I am waiting for my real life to begin. I intend to keep my identity as a Meitei, like Shelly's brook.