



Melei Leisna nungjumapal
[Khongamelei]

Chapter 2

Beginning of Life in the UK



At a dinner & Dance party in my Golf Club in 1978, with visiting Friend Dev Puri, an industrialist from Delhi. Margaret and an Irish nursing friend Phil Sterling.

Memories are our most treasured possessions. My memories are not different from anybody's, except that these are my memories of those days when I had false, difficult smiles of uneasy gaiety, and pitiful graces, which attempted a fascination that hurrying years have rendered vain.

So, Continuing the story of my life in the UK is simple. Nothing exciting. Nothing much to write about except for a few events that I am

passionate about, while avoiding the black hole, where unwanted bits have been dropped.

There are inspiring prompts that spark memories of my life's association with this country and the wisdom gained. Before I go through them, here is a bit that might be historical in the context of Manipuri diaspora overseas.

That I was the fourth Manipuri Meitei who settled in the UK as pioneers. Others are Dr RK Sanayaima from Keisampat, Dr Longjam Jogendra from Kongba and Dr Mansing also from Kongba. We all came for postgraduate studies and settled in the UK in the mid-1960s. There are now innumerable Meitei diasporas all over the world. Men, women, and their children.



In the Terrace Bar of Parliament with another local MP Marsha Singh
Revolving 'London Eye' for sightseeing in the background.

In the previous chapter I gave a rough sketch of the standard of medical practice in Imphal and Manipur up to the immediate post war period, in stark contrast to the current very high standard of health care. I will be talking a bit more for the record and as the main reason of why we all came to London in those days, in the first place. And in my case, what actually beguiled me to come to London as an edge forward to my life at that time.

Meiteis in Imphal in those days, had no choice but to be happy with the poor quality of medical care infrastructure and inadequate health facilities that existed during my school and college days. It was all because of poverty that resulted in shortage of doctors, lack of medicine, and many other prohibitive costs that stood in the way of providing good quality health care.

We had what we could afford. We were lucky we had a handful of Licentiate Medical Practitioners (LMP) who qualified from Berry White Medical School in Dibrugarh, which after Indian Independence, became the Assam Medical College.

My departure for London had some bearing on this poor quality of care in Imphal and other places like Churachandpur in Manipur, in comparison to the one I experienced at my college in Agra and the hospitals in Delhi. I wanted to raise the standard.

On top of it, a disgusting medical episode in my pre-medical student life, with a doctor specialist in Calcutta, left me with an enduring desire to be a 'proper doctor' who will be a strong advocate for my patients.

The progress of medicine has changed from an art form to science. This of course, is unlike the one I met in Calcutta. Dr Premchand in Imphal, for instance, knows all that is there to know in the scientific aspects of diabetes as he is a specialist in diabetes.

Once, in Calcutta, on my way back to college in Nainital from Imphal, I went to consult a specialist doctor with an MRCP (Lond) on his name plate that was screwed on the wall near the entrance door of the building. It was just in case. It was in 1955.

I had then been suffering for quite some time from a persistent abdominal discomfort for which there was no diagnostic criteria and therefore no real treatment. The condition required investigations to

exclude other organic illnesses. I have been investigated in Bombay. It was only while I was studying in Edinburgh that a non-specific diagnosis was appended. It became known as irritable bowel syndrome.



Author giving a talk at India House in London, on Introduction of Manipuri Culture – a slide presentation. (Ravindranath, Pushpa and Asha behind).

The specialist was in College Street, Calcutta. I went in and saw a nurse, who took the story of my complaint. She charged me ₹10 and asked me to come back in an hour. I went back expecting to see the doctor who would examine me physically and perhaps knew something about my condition. To my surprise, the nurse handed me a prescription of Magnesium trisilicate, an antacid that I had taken gallons of.

Back to the current story of my life in the UK. The groundwork of writing this part of my story began one night of last December 2021. It was a damp night with a light mist outside swarming around the streetlamp. I went to bed and sat up with my head propped up on the pillow against the bedhead. I read a book that my son Neil gave me as a Christmas present last year. Until that night I had been busy writing *My memories of Imphal*.

The book was the life story of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Prize winner from Burma, by Peter Popham. She was so famous that during our holiday in Burma in 2012, we went to see her house at 54 University Ave, Yangon, by the Inya Lake. This beautiful lake is the largest in

Yangon, Myanmar, which is a famous locality for romance in popular culture. It was very romantic to stay at a hotel in it that was built on stilts and thatch roofed.



Outside the gate of Aung San Suu Kyi's residence, 54-56 University Ave, Yangon, on the shore of the beautiful Inlay Lake, with a Myamnaresse courier painted with *thanka* paste on her face. 2012

The book began with how after schooling at the Jesus and Mary convent, and college at Lady Shree Ram, both in Delhi, she came to London in 1964. She then went to Oxford for her post graduate studies.

On that freezing night of December, in the grip of Arctic cold outside, I closed the book at 1.30 am, switched off the light and lay down to sleep, thinking about what Dr Premchand had said about writing my early life in the UK.

I lay motionless in forlorn silence, listening to the muffled prattle of gusty December downpour of sleet that was bashing on the double-glazed window glass. I was alone in the dark night of the soul. My restless mind wandered off and drifted away from me. Soon I had a dream. A beautiful dream. I was back to my native land and my hometown of Imphal.

It was a dream of density with induced anxiety, all of which I could not remember the next day. It was ethereal, and woozily enjoyable at times. It was not just another dream. It was certainly much more than that. It was like my various repressed memories were being reprocessed. My mind rioted, reliving my past.

Those dream elements were, a jumble of my daytime thoughts, such as the memory of my mother and father in a pensive and brooding mood, the morning I left home. I remembered how I boarded a propeller-powered Dakota aircraft at the Tulihal Airport for Calcutta en route to London.

I woke up after about 2 hours. It was still dark. I had a feeling of a brief flutter of my heart. I had a nightmare but could not recall much in detail. All that remained languishing was the horror that I could not go back home to practice medicine. It was near-delusional. It was as though I was up a short flight of stairs that threatened to crumble under my own weight.

In the predawn darkness and chill, I struggled to raise the nightmare up from my subconscious, by self-assuring that my *bête noir* or the bugbear of my life had long been resolved and that I have now got my poetic justice. I am here with the postgraduate degree I came for and I have settled here with my family in the UK. All is well that ends well.

In those waking hours while still in bed with the wall light switched on, many recollections flew past like dry sage grasses in the desert, which were blown by wind in cowboy films of the American West.

I recanted how I jumped through hoops in search of my personal silk route to happiness and how I tried to order my life's chaotic tumble of events that was waiting at the gate of my life's adventure. I was aware that my efforts to live the good life of my dreams had become a reality.

The realisation filled me with conscious pleasure. It was as an experience of gratification of instinctual impulses. Soon, my rambling thought transcended from the present to the past without too much of my past winking at me from the shadow of my room.

Charging with excitement, and a sense of freedom of my mind to meander in a mood of belligerent exuberance, many places, names, pleasant and unpleasant anecdotes tumbled out. Many faces came back as clear as the painting on the wall of my bedroom – the famous painting of a Burmese girl, Saw Ohn Nyu, by Sir Gerard Kelly.

Many more life events came out from the mental crypt where I had buried them. I remembered the half-finished nursing home that my father and brother had built at Thangal Bazaar in Imphal, and how I had built a castle in the air for a Swiss-style Chalet, to live in our country house at Iroishemba. It was dream, dream, dream; all that I had was dream. Then, suddenly the totality of things and real events shattered my fragile fairyland.

It all ended remembering the image of Heavy Weight Champion Muhammed Ali in his book with the caption: Shake my mind and shake the things that trap the grind. Escape the dream, shooting star, I am supreme.” I went to sleep again contented that; in life you cannot achieve everything you set your mind to.



Famous painting by Sir Gerard Kelly.
A Burmese girl Saw Ohn Nyu, Princess of Burma.

In the following days, the Delhi phase of Aung San's biography among the vast text of her life, took my mind back to Delhi where I did my doctor's training in 1962. Like her, I also came to London from Delhi in 1966, after a spell in Imphal. Eventually, I settled in the City of Bradford.

My wandering mind travelled further, past Delhi to Agra. This segment of my life in the medical college in Agra, planted the seed that grew until I came to London. It was like the biblical Parable of growing seed. In Agra the professors were either MD, MRCP (Lond) or MS, FRCS (Lond). I wanted to follow in their footsteps. Agra jogged my happy student days where I held my head high.

Wherever I went, not only in Agra, but also, I, somehow turned out to be a bit different from the average students, either in notoriety or cause célèbre. It was not by design. It was by default. A crude projection of my personality.

In the medical College in Agra, I was the general secretary of the pre-clinical students' union in the first year of the course and later, the boxing champion in the clinical stage and the Senior Under-Officer in the NCC in the last two final years.



Author, standing 3rd from right, 1957. As general Secretary of Pre-clinical Students Union. Except five of us, the rest are teachers.



As Badminton player

Once I commanded a massive parade of NCC cadets from all the colleges of Agra on a Republic Day celebration. That created some animosity with some tough guys in other colleges. A couple of times I had to swallow my pride. I had enough sense that it was not worth a knife plunged into my tummy, just before I qualified as a doctor. Discretion is better part of valour.



Author [3rd Left sitting] Senior Under-Officer NCC.

Agra Medical College, in the final Year, 1962.

(I had the shiniest badge that was given by Sawaijam Sobita Debi)

I left my Medical College in Agra for Delhi to do my House Surgeon's training, instead of in my college, though I had a place for training. By then I had had enough of Agra, and I wanted to have a good time in Delhi. Quite a lot of fun, I did have.

In Delhi, time passed quickly. Time flies when you're enjoying yourself in your head clock. It means, you are not deterred by the world's clock. You follow your own time in your head. And lo and behold, I overstayed for nearly a year, training in obstetrics and psychiatry, apart from medicine and surgery which were required for registration with the British Medical Council just in case I might want to go and study in London. I did come to London.

Britain at that time after WWII, needed many trained doctors from overseas to run its National Health Service (NHS), which was introduced in 1948 and was free for everybody at the receiving end. However, in post war Britain, because of poor economy following WWII, the British Government could not afford to train thousands of their own doctors. So, they employed readymade ones from abroad.

When I was Doctors' Mess secretary at Irwin Hospital, such invitations often came from the British Consulate in Delhi. At one time I filled in the form for entry to Britain. After about two weeks I got a voucher with which I could go to London any day. I soon forgot all about it as I had no intention of going there soon.

Hundreds of Indian doctors went. They were popular as they spoke good English that the lay British people could understand and the curriculum in our colleges were the same as in British Medical Schools. They do not have Medical Colleges.

The standard of medical care in the British National Health Service, is the best in the world in as much as it provides medical care, regardless of income, class, or creed. It has all the latest technologies. Specialist

doctors take six to eight years of training after their specialist degrees before they can practice unsupervised.

In another basic speciality known as General Practice, a doctor takes five years' training after their graduation: a two-year Foundation course followed by a three-year Specialist course. During the last three years, the doctor must pass a specialist examination of MRCGP.

All doctors are required to keep their professional knowledge up-to-date and must keep a 'standard of practice expected of them'. There are regulations to ensure that they keep this part of the bargain. The ethics of practising doctors are watched very carefully by the General Medical Council, to safeguard their patients.

Now, jogging back to my storyline in Delhi. After receiving the voucher that gave me the visa to go to UK and settle there if I so wished, I had a moral conundrum. I could not go to the UK straight away. I had been away from home for eleven years in my hubristic college life except during summer holidays. They were all funded privately by my parents.

Besides, I stayed longer in Delhi beyond my requirement. I had also lost three years in my early schooling due to Japanlan.

So, I shelved the idea of going to the UK completely. I did not want to exceed the boundaries of acceptable human ethics. It was not fair to my family that I should be gallivanting again so soon after my graduation as a doctor. So, I returned home and joined Civil Hospital in Imphal as mentioned earlier, but only after I received a letter from my brother saying it was time for the prodigal son to return. It was in mid-1963.

Speaking of fond memories. My past life had always been a merry-go-round. Study cum pleasure. I was not a book worm. I chose to go to college in Bombay for fun. My study was secondary. My father said I could study anywhere in India if I was doing well in my study. I did just that.

I would like to tell a story here about Bombay, by way of exposing one other facet of my character, which is that I never ever forget people, who were good to me, as well as who were bad to me. And I always paid back in the same coin or at least tried to. I avenged all who were treacherous to me except one. This person happens to be a close relative and I did not want to upset her mother.

While I was studying in Bombay with limited funds, I was fortunate to meet a class fellow who was quite rich, and who became my closest friend. We gelled together. He spent all the money for my extracurricular activities like eating in expensive Bombay restaurants, going on week-end holidays to hill stations, such as Panchgani and Matheran near Poona.

He had his own car to go to college. His name was Mohammed Patel. He in due course, married Munira, who was captain of Indian women's hockey team.



With Munira and Mahomed Patel at his flat in 1974

Years later in the mid-1970s, after I had just settled in the UK, it was my burning desire to go to Bombay and find Mohammed so that I could return some of the favours he did to me. I had been dreaming day and night aloud that my wife was quite familiar with him as if she had met him.



With children at Juhu Beach, Bombay 1984.

Eventually, my wife and I went to Bombay and found him with his wife Munira and two grown-up sons, Karim, and Ismail. They lived at the most expensive Marine Drive at Chowpatty Sea face, facing the Indian Ocean. We received him at the famous Taj Mahal Hotel – a hotel which, as a student I promised myself that, one day I would return and stay there.

Since then, we spent many years together until he died quite some years ago. I was not able to pay him back as much as I wanted. He would not let me do so. At least, I was able to show my gratitude.



At Shamiana Restaurant at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay on Oct 7, 2004
With my friend Mohammed and his wife Munira

We went to Goa a couple of times together along with our wives, while staying at his villa by the Mondovi River. We had very good time in Bombay.

Now I am going back to Imphal from Bombay. In Imphal I spent two years at the Civil Hospital as doctor in-charge of Medicine. It was the only Hospital. I tried to improve the standard of medical practice. I am happy that I believe I did a good job. I was the first doctor who ever used an ECG machine to diagnose heart troubles. It is frightening for patients now that I come to think of it.

What was more important for me at that time, was the gratification that I had respect from people in Imphal. I had status. It was partly because there was not a single doctor with a postgraduate degree in Manipur at that time. A few senior doctors had then left for postgraduate studies, such as Dr Lalmohan for MS (surgery), Dr Surchand for MS (Eye), Dr Kuladhjaja for MD and Dr Kh Jatiswar for obstetrics & Gynaecology.

Life for me in Imphal was hunky dory. I was influential and would get away with murder. I had most things I wanted for my department as Dr Malhotra, the Director of the Medical Directorate at that time, was aware of my connections in Imphal society. He called it my ability for 'push and pull'. He even asked me to organise a picnic at the Sekmai Riverbed for all the doctors and their wives. I did it as a novelty.



Author at Sekmai Riverbed Picnic with Director Malhotra standing, 1964.

I also became a very eligible bachelor and was having a very good time. The good life, however, did not last long. I came to know for the first time that, fate, myth, and survival are inexorably entangled in life.

I was transferred to the District Hospital at Churachandpur at my request, as I wanted to be the monarch of all I surveyed. The proverb says it's better to be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion. Meaning it is better to be a leader than one among a group. That also ended abruptly as I chose to come to London. Unhappiness has not sapped all my energy.

I did come to London with the prospect of returning to Imphal with a postgraduate degree in Medicine and run a modern Nursing Home that was half-built with all the mod cons. Ambitions are born at the beginning of adulthood.

Little did I know then, expectation and fulfilment are not like the two sides of the same coin. Expectation-fulfilment theory posits that expectation is a non-discharged emotional arousal that that was expressed the previous day. I remember Einstein saying, "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking."



Author examining a child at Churachandpur Hospital with Staff Nurse Mannu.
June 1, 1965. Just before he left for London.