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[Khongamelei]

Chapter 3

Beginning of my life in the UK



BMA Annual Conference in Bournemouth 1989. Author (2nd from left) as BMA President of Bradford City. With BMA Chairman Dr John Marks & wife.

Nothing stays the same forever. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus (born in 544 BCE) before Socrates said, “No man steps in the same river twice’, for it is not the same river and he’s not the same man.” The only constant is change and life is like a river.

Forgetting our ancient friend Heraclitus, in modern physics in the 1850s, the second law of Thermodynamics, known as entropy, dictates that in

all ordered systems like life, things invariably move from order to disorder. This is the reason why all things change.

Change is also in the nature of evolution through natural selection. Change is also constant in mechanical engineering especially with the use of computers. When I bought my first Mercedes Benz car, I went for a test drive. It was like floating in the cloud, after the experience of driving all those cheaper cars. What a change it was. But that comfort lasted only a few years. The novelty soon wore off as newer model Mercedes with better insulations from undulations in the road surface, came into the market.

Likewise, my good life in Imphal in the mid- 1960s began to an end. I got myself transferred to Churachandpur. Meanwhile, with the uncertainty of my professional future, I was also gravitating towards another inner turmoil, which I carried inside that no one could see. "To be or not to be", asked Hamlet to himself about his existence. 'To marry or not to marry now' was the question I asked myself.

I have been bitten by true love once as a young man. I read Shakespeare who wrote: 'The course of true love did never run smooth', said Lysander to Hermia in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. I don't think the implication has changed much in the past 457 years since the birth of Shakespeare. I learnt it the hard way and not from reading Shakespeare.

I learnt it from experience that any long relationship will have its ups and downs as circumstances in life change. Many things come out of your control. An idiomatic truth that I found out at my peril. It is only interesting when I look back to it. There are positive sides to such breakdowns though. It is good to remember that such a loss might leave space again for other good things to happen. "Love is an ideal thing; marriage is a real thing (Goethe). I will talk about it later.

So, I was transferred to the District Hospital in Churachandpur with the arrival of Dr Pukhrambam Kumud from London with his MRCP. With his

postgraduate degree he would take over as the physician of the Civil Hospital, and I would be demoted to a run-of-the mill doctor with only my graduate degree. That was not something I would let it happen to me. I had an ego about the size of Loktak Lake. Only that it was dry.

It was good that I had the power of 'push and pull' among the bureaucrats in Imphal, speaking metaphorically. With the news of the imminent arrival of Dr Kumud I began to shift my mental gear forward and backward for an amicable solution to my status and it tweaked.

Churachandpur was the next best place after Imphal. Not too far not too near. Before I heard about my fate straight from the horse's mouth, I pre-empted it. I wanted to whack myself to go to a place where I will see my situation in a different light.

I talked to the Medical Director Mr Malhotra, and I got myself transferred to Churachandpur District Hospital. The Bengali doctor I replaced, was not too happy. He would not speak to me when I took the charge from him. I did not blame him.

Churachandpur is a beautiful town with rolling hills and lush green vegetation. Many modern amenities such as electricity were available. During the time I was posted there, it was like staying at the foothills of a holiday hill resort and all paid for. Nothing much to do there.

As a bachelor, I had some sort of party on most evenings, often just drinking whiskies with the SDO, a Punjabi IAS officer about my age, deputed by Delhi. No friends, no relatives. Only girlfriends. I was not a bachelor by default but by choice. It was because I was not mentally and physically settled about my career.

I became friendly with Lt Col Jagdish, the Commander of the 7 Guards Battalion that was stationed at Churachandpur for counter-insurgency deployment. I was entertained with government-issue Officers' rum, most nights, followed by dinner, at the officers' mess in a tent. Life was easy while the going was good, except that I was not in the Army.

Medical practice at this District Hospital with 30 beds, was just basic. Only that, rarely I had to perform emergency surgeries, such as Caesarean section or forceps delivery and the like. I was trained in Gynaecology and obstetrics in Delhi. Very soon, my life at Churachandpur was becoming dry and yellow like the foliage of deciduous tree in winter. It began to impinge on my mental health. Soon it took a physical toll from the lifestyle I was having.

I was not happy with my present job. But I was not doing anything to advance my career. My life then, was a wasteful one, I thought, after all the years of education and training.

As almost all patients who came to the hospital were only with minor ailments, I began to forget the real practice of medicine. My life became an anachronism on escapism. That is, in avoiding unpleasant realities in Imphal I became to exist at Churachandpur, to practice medicine that was a long way behind time.

My thoughts began to ramble about finding a way forward. I began to wonder whether I was going to be a turkey that was voting for Christmas by choosing to be a doctor, who could not fulfil his ambition of being confident and proud in the society.

I began to agonise over what my true level in life should be, till I realised the answer was painfully simple. To go to London for post-graduate study. Mentally, I did not have time to rehearse my decision and scratch the numbness that filled my mind. Impossibility was a precept which I could not precisely define.

But my lifestyle continued in a carnival-like spirit with a few shots of free rum each night, and a hangover in the morning, often with a frontal headache and nausea lurching in my stomach. As I was not eating much because of the drinks I was losing weight. It was easy to spend the evening and night with the warm glow of alcohol, forgetting all the worries of the world.

It was like I was sinking into the ground and that also at a geometrical rate. My career was uncertain. At the whim of the health minister or the Chief Minister I could be posted anywhere far in any part of Manipur where there was a health clinic. I was only a small fry and privy to nothing. I was not a Missionary of Charities like Mother Teresa, either. My lifestyle will soon be an antithesis to the one I grew up with.

It was a personal conundrum and yet, the phrase seemed too commonplace for the two opposing directions in whose clash I then, sensed a potential for disaster. I detested the idea that my career would end without cheers. My emotions seemed stirred to a thin, weary turmoil by the passing of days. I kept my feelings to myself as I thought the problem could be fixed. I was not too worried. It was only a question of planning.

It might well have been sensible to wish to duck the conflict by accepting to be a persona non grata, as a government doctor who gets transferred all over Manipur, or a doctor in private practice in Imphal. But without a post-graduate degree the later seemed doomed before it started. That won't make mental explosions about loss of self-esteem, going off all around me any less real.



Wedding June 6, 1970.

I was also unsettled by my delayed bachelorhood of my own doing. I was nearing the watershed of 30. I had not so far, responded to the call for marriage as I was unsettled. I was very lucky that three lady doctors wanted to marry me. Individually of course. There was one more highly educated girl from an influential family, who proposed to me for marriage.

I knew all of them. I was friendly with all of them, and I would feel very uncomfortable to marry one of them and leave the rest crestfallen. We were living and working at close quarters. Though I have acted all my life as a tough guy I am in essence, a softy at heart. I just could not overthrow the inner governor – call it conscience, call it ethics. Don't think me ungrateful. It was just that I was still in the phenomenon of prolonging adolescence.

I had the capacity of going to a medical institute outside Manipur for an MD degree. That meant going off again for another 3 years at least. The idea was not complimentary for me at that time. I had just come back after 11 years of study in colleges outside of Manipur.

There was also a talk from the Manipur government of sending me for an MD in psychiatry. I was not keen on it either. In any case, my ambition was hooked on getting MRCP from London, right from the days in my medical College, where all the professors were with MRCP or FRCS.

I had another chance of joining the Army. While I was in the 4th year in Medical College, a recruiting Army medical officer, one Lt Col came to recruit students to join the Army medical Corp.

As I was Senior Under-Officer, he was quite keen on me. I was also quite interested. And the Army would start paying the college fees from the 5th year. But when I wrote to my eldest brother, he wrote me back against it and that he would send me to London for my MRCP. I dropped the idea, so as not to disappoint him and our parents.



Honeymoon at Lake Lucerne, Switzerland 1970.

Speaking of matrimony, my nostalgic mood has lanced out a long-forgotten story of my youth with gnawing unease. It was embroidered with moral and ethical dilemmas. Poignant memories sometimes do not age.

The youthful memory goes back to about 70 years. I had a teenage romance. It was the only one. It was as much the product of my youth as the time of my emancipation from the dreary schooling days. It was full of excitement.

I did not exactly understand the historical or evidential complexities of a romance. It was an enterprise for me. I had just finished schooling and saw this girl one day. She was reserved. She was slender but with grace and elegance, which was pleasingly ingenuous to me

I managed to pass on a letter with 3-4 lines. I cannot remember the words now. She responded favourably. I was over the moon. Intoxication was subtle, a tremor in the blood stream. As physical mixing of a boy and a girl was taboo at that time in Imphal, it soon became an epistolary romance, writing sweet nothings, like 'I can't live without you'

and things like that. We hardly met. As it happened, three months after I left for college to Bombay. And she eventually went to study in Delhi.



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Over time, our love affair became the talk of the town. I was quite well-known in the small town of Imphal. It had further traction as I was the first student who went to college in Bombay - a dream city for all teenagers. Our romance became more animated partly because of my flamboyance, and partly because of her personality of a balanced extroversion (ambivert) and confidence.

It lasted 7 years, and I must have written a caboodle of love letters in the pseudo name of Tinkerbelle Tenduffla. A name I borrowed from a

Tibetan girl of that name I knew at the Loreto Convent in Darjeeling. I believed it was a perfect romance – ‘one conducted entirely by post’

Nothing lasts forever. It was my father who taught me that everything has a life. He was pointing to the iron pillars that we had at home, which as a young boy, I thought would last for ever.

I also remember John Steinbeck’s “Of Mice and Men”. “No matter how well we may plan the future, things often go wrong.” It was nobody’s fault that events turned out as they did. It was all down to the specific combination of circumstances which go to make up the plot. Happiness is ephemeral. “Art is long, and Time is fleeting” (A psalm of Life, Longfellow). The ethereal romance came to an end one day, because of misinformation or disinformation from a trusted friend.

The drip-feed of gossip continued to find its way into the public domain. My pride was a bit wounded, but my heart was relieved. A faint wrathful indignation unfurled in me with the storm of love that rocked the boat. I perhaps, misread the tea leaves. She might have had other irons in the fire.

I respectfully ended our affaire-d’amour with a final epistle – a ‘billet-doux to Mon Cherie amour’. I was then a student in the medical college. She had her pride and did not barter. It looked like any romance or the lack of it. It had taken all of seven years to part. She married a non-Manipuri Mayang and left Imphal.

It turned out to be that we were not exactly like Leila and Majnu, or Romeo and Juliet. Human emotions tend to have many ups and downs like periodic oscillations of sine waves moving across an oscillograph. It was a part of growing up. Eventually, I also settled with an English girl.

With hindsight, when I go philosophical, I know life is unpredictable. Often a terrain of tragic miscalculations. (‘Wheeling and dealing.’) A small event can change the direction of your entire life. As the old

proverb says: There's a many slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. Things can still go wrong while the conclusion seems certain.

On the other hand, sometimes what looks like a very bad day can be just clearing the way for good things to come. Much of what happens to us in our later life are the consequences of choices we made before. Karma in Hinduism. That is how I am here, writing the story.



Settled in the house I just bought. Life has begun.

I only became philosophical late in life because of my sets of beliefs, prejudices, convictions, and spiritual laxity. Like many young people, I am not very much into the existence of a God. Existence of God is a philosophy. Philosophies after all, are points of view of different people about a sceptical subject.

I had no more airy-fairy romances. But I did have small flings, such as a Muslim girl, Aftab Alam from Chandni Chowk, who I met in Delhi, among others, who wanted me to become a Muslim so that she could marry me. Life is a conundrum of esoterica.

Let me go back to Churachandpur after a bit of this romantic escapade. My mind then became a labyrinth of slum through which I could not thread my way out. I began to suffer from all the self-doubts that came from being a non-specialist in Medicine. I detested the idea that my

career would end without cheers. Without a postgraduate degree I would forever remain without a high social status and with a blunted ego. I was not ready for a life on the downward slope.



I brought my wife home to see what she thinks of it. And met my old friends.
From L-R Nishikanta, Margaret & Raghmani [Our old Ambassador car].

While I was at this crossroads, but with undiminished confidence, navigating my mental iceberg in trying to find a direction towards a larger understanding of my life that lay ahead, a reminder to come to London, arrived with a voucher from the British Consulate in Calcutta. To rephrase it, something I have forgotten completely, appeared like a bolt from the blue.

It seemed as if the penny had dropped. The smallest welling of improbable hope rose in me. I had an epiphany. I quickly seized the opportunity. With the fresh smell of my ego rising, I revved up with a buzz of a big moving story. With the help of my friend, Saxena, the Chief Secretary, I manage to get a passport and visa immediately from Calcutta.

The reality had kicked in. I saw light at the end of the tunnel. I lapped it up because that was all I had for reshaping my destiny. Though I was not a believer in the idea of manifest destiny, that little piece of paper

became a metaphysical pivot that changed my life forever. Armed with a little imagination to steel myself against living in the raucous wilderness of the past 2 years, I quickly zeroed in on my personal and career ambition.

I had the good fortune at that time, of knowing Dr Longjam Jogendra Singh from Kongba, who was then in the UK. He wrote a couple of letters asking me to come to UK.



Late Dr Longjam Jogendra with late Sonia (Philippine wife of late Chongtham Sarat) and Margaret behind, at his home in Nuneaton near Birmingham, opening a bottle of champagne.

With a clutch of expectancy in my chest and arrogant confidence, I at once, decided to go to London for study cum work, and to sample the British way of life. I wanted a fair crack at the whip. I wanted to be respected. I did not want to spend the rest of my life with bellows of frustration. I left for London after I promised my dotting mother that I would come back home in 3 and maximum 4 years.

Where there is a will, there is a way. My existential life is about to begin.

