



Melei Leisna Nungjumapal
[Khongamelei]

362

Chapter 4

Beginning of my life in the UK



Visitor (Late)r Dr Mutum Somarendro. Margaret & our children Anita and Neil by the seaside town of Scarborough of the famous hippy song: ‘Are you going to Scarborough Fair? Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme. Remember me to one who lives there. She once was a true love of mine’.

In the previous chapter I gave a broad account of why and how I came to the UK. In the middle of this story, I am faced with a challenge as great as writing about my intense personal feelings, thoughts, and insights. I have written many books, but they have been rather robot-like.



Handing over the Chain of Office by the previous President to author,
First Asian President of BMA, the City of Bradford and Airedale.
June 12, 1991.

Writing this piece with a plethora of emotions is quite daunting. My disposition that I felt I had to be better than most, prevailed upon me to give myself a fair crack of the whip. The determination was as stubborn as an English bull terrier dog. This personality trait which was passed on to me by both inheritance and environment, remained dominant throughout my entire life. I never played second fiddle, nor did I ever lose my self-esteem. I was not going to do that at that point of my career or ever.

Unlike most Indian doctors, I did not come here to find a job and to domicile. It was the zeitgeist of the time in the late 1950s for Indian doctors to avail of the opportunity the British Consulate was offering. In my case, it was a crude clash of self and personality structure with time and the prevailing circumstances. I had a few choices to advance my career. Perspective or the way I looked at life. I kept my mind open.

Eventually, I chose the one that would be self-supporting. So, keeping pedagogical dogma aside, and with enough personal conviction to recognise my gut instinct, one fine morning, I left home for Calcutta with a hurriedly packed tattered suitcase, en route to London. Sister Nienglen

(from Churachandpur), who used to be my ward Sister at Civil Hospital in Imphal, came to see me off along with a host of my relatives.

After boarding the plane at Tulihal Airport I was consumed with bitter-sweet feelings. The anxiety about landing in London with only thirty-five pounds in my pocket, and what I would be doing if I could not contact Dr Jogendra! On the other, I was happy that I had now the freedom to discover myself and to explore my limits to myself. I was glad I was single bereft of obligations of a married man. Regrettably, I did not have time to say goodbye to many near and dear ones.

I said goodbye to my parents before I left for Tulihal Airport to fly to Calcutta. My mother sitting on the veranda of our house, said to me: "Don't forget you left your father and mother at home, don't eat beef and don't marry a mem. Little did I envisage that I would 'fall in love' with an English girl (mem) I met at my second job at a hospital in the town of Gateshead, near Newcastle, and that she would turn the course of my life upside down.

In Calcutta, I bought a plane ticket for London via Zurich by the Swiss Airlines, from the Grand Hotel shopping corridor for ₹75,000. For history, the exchange rate at that time was ₹10 for £1.0). I was allowed foreign exchange only for 5 pounds, which I collected from the Reserve Bank of India. I left Calcutta one day later, by an evening flight.

In Calcutta, I managed to get hold of a pair of long Johns and a woollen overcoat from a tailoring shop at Lyndsey Street, near the famous Park Street, off Chowringhee Road. I also met the late Dr Sanjoy from Khurai Lairikyengbam Leikai, who was a veterinary surgeon. We spent one evening together with a half bottle of Vodka and orange juice [screwdriver] before I left for London.

I arrived in London on February 10, 1966, with only £35 in my pocket, leaving the rest of my life in the lap of gods. Having been armed with a work voucher from the British Consulate in Calcutta, I was hoping to get

a job, any job at a hospital very quickly to fund myself. And I did find a job in one week. It was great. A new life was on its way swimmingly.



Fontana de Trevi – the Wishing Well in Rome.

Famous with the Hollywood movie song (1961). ‘Three coins in the fountain. Each one longing for its own. There they lie in the Fountain. Which one will the fountain bless? One heart will wear a valentine. Make it mine.’

London had always been an exciting place for me, since I read in Primary School, how ships sail on the river Thames, while trains run underneath. *London gi thames turel gi mathakta jahaj chatlaga makhadna train chelli.* I wondered then, how it was possible!



Cold and dreary London weather. Piccadilly Circus with the statue of Eros.

I discovered what it meant after I arrived in London and travelled by underground (Tube) for the first time. Once, I travelled from Westminster underground station located by the side of the Parliament Building in the north of the River Thames to Wimbledon station in the south of the river. It passed across the river Thames, through a tunnel dug under the riverbed. Part of this line is overground train as it approached Wembley, but it is still called underground as it is part of the underground railway network.

That morning in London when I arrived at Heathrow Airport, was slate-grey, frosty, and miserable. It was 10 o'clock in the morning. By about 11 am after collecting my baggage from the carousel, I went out to face the customs officer.

After looking at my work voucher, he asked how long I was going to stay in the UK. He did not believe me when I said 3 or 4 years. I said, I only came here to work as a student. He asked me to take off my newly purchased watch (a smuggled watch from Churachandpur) from my wrist. He looked at it and he must have realised it was not an expensive one.

He showed me a little card about the size of a playing card with printed writing on it. It read 'I have nothing to declare'. I said no. He then directed me to see a doctor in a cubicle. The elderly doctor was quite nice, knowing that I was a doctor and I had come for postgraduate studies. We had a little chat and he let me go without giving me a medical examination.

Coming outside the concourse, London was foggy and damp. The atmosphere was heavy with moisture. My breath hung in the chill air. It was freezing cold despite my great coat and leather gloves. The rain clouds grew darker and heavier as I got inside a typical rounded black London taxi or cab with 3 seats across in the back and 2 flip-down seats facing backwards.

Though I was quite used to Hill Stations in India, having lived in Darjeeling and Nainital, and having been to a few others, I found the atmosphere in level London rather daunting with the strangeness of a foreign country. I had an uncanny feeling. People seemed to go about their lives very quietly. There was no din and bustle, no sweat and stench of an Indian city that I was used to. People used to speak to each other without shouting.

I gave the cab driver the address of a small Indian hostel, which Dr Jatiswar had given to me. It was somewhere in Russell Street. I remember reading a brochure before I came, of what to do or not to, while in London. So, I did not forget to tip the driver a quarter of a pound (I had only 5 pounds in my pocket) and say thank you.

The owner of the hostel, an Indian, was none too happy, as he knew my money would have been limited to only 5 pounds. My spirit suddenly plummeted. I told him that I had more than 5 pounds and that I would not be staying there more than a couple of days. He allowed me to stay in a twin-bedded room with another Indian doctor student from America.

Next morning, two of us went out by the tube (Metro) to Piccadilly Circus and walked to Trafalgar Square nearby [The centre of London], after he has been to The Royal London Hospital for his job interview. He had been in London for a month. Somewhere at Soho (London's Night life area) near Piccadilly Circus, I telephoned Dr L Jogendra from a payphone outside. He asked me to come to Halifax, a town in the north of England, where he was staying.



Trafalgar Square with Nelson's Column, Central London landmark

He gave me the directions. Next morning, I caught a train from Kings Cross. I arrived there in the afternoon. He was the only resident doctor at a small Chest Hospital. He lived in a nicely furnished flat with en-suite bathroom, wall-to-wall deep pile carpet and a lounge with television and telephone. It looked fabulous. I was very impressed.

There were uniformed hospital maids to serve him bed-tea, lunch, evening tea with cakes, and dinner. 'Cleaner ladies' - house maids, came in the morning about 11 am to make his beds and clean the rooms and bathroom. And there was an attached guest room with attached bathroom, where I stayed.

After doing his MRCP, he was temporarily working there, while he was deciding what to do for the rest of his life. Life was good here.

After one week, I got a job as a trainee Senior House Officer (SHO) in Anaesthetics at the Halifax Royal Infirmary in the same town as Dr Jogendra's. I had free lodging and boarding at the Doctors' Residence in the hospital compound. The monthly pay was about 68 pounds. There were many junior doctors. All from Pakistan and India. Not a single British doctor apart from the consultants.

All the trainee British doctors were in teaching hospitals. We immigrant doctors were here as a pair of hands to run such provincial hospitals. There was no teaching. Out of these doctors, most of them continued to stay as general practitioners, as there were many vacancies. Many of my class fellows also settled likewise. Only I continued to slog to get my degree as I wanted to return home.

When I got this job, I was relieved. I finally overcame the demons that contributed to my anxiety. Thus, began my life in the United Kingdom. I began to try to integrate in this foreign land, following their customs.

The residential accommodation was not as grand as Dr Jogendra's, but the services were the same. Each morning at 8 am, a maid would come to my room and wake me up with a cup of tea, saying "Good morning, Dr Singh". And I would be ready for breakfast. After breakfast in the Dining room, I would go to the Operating Theatre by 10 am.

We had lunch break for two hours at 12 o'clock. The doctors' mess at the hospital was like a little restaurant. Waitresses in uniforms served the three course meals on tables with cloths. Soup, main course, and pudding. Fruit juice of three kinds and tomato juice were available at lunch times. English people do not drink water with food.

The Operating Theatre would close at 5 pm. For evening tea at 6 pm in the common room, there were a variety of cakes and sandwiches. In the evening, another maid would come to prepare the beds. She would remove the bedspread and fold it up. Then, she would flip over a bit of the outer corner of the duvet in a triangular shape to make it easy for the sleeper to lift it and get under. A smaller comforter lay on top, which you could use if you found it too cold or remove it easily. It was like a 5 Star hotel.

Here in this hospital, I had my first cultural shock. As was routine for an anaesthetist junior doctor, I had to go to surgical wards in the evenings,

for a cursory cardio-vascular examination and premedication of patients for next morning's operations. One night I was dumbfounded to find a 17-year-old female patient, completely naked inside a see through dressing gown.

I was more embarrassed than her, so I avoided physical examination of her and left the premedication tablets for her to take. In general, English women are not shy to strip for a doctor. No one will ever say no. After 3 weeks of training, I was put on night duty for emergencies of child with an eye injury one night. Instead of intubating into the trachea through the nose, I put it through the gullet. I had difficulty intubating it through the child's small nostril and so I did it through her mouth.

The anaesthetic machine was on, and I was talking to the junior surgeon, when I realised that the child's face was becoming like a balloon as the oxygen and anaesthetic were going into the tissues rather into the lungs (surgical emphysema). I was very scared. I called the Consultant anaesthetist on call. He handled it. The child was okay in a few hours. I applied for a job in medicine at some other hospital.

I worked there for three months. Then I moved to another hospital at Gateshead Town, where I got a job in Medicine, which was the speciality I came to study. There, I met my future wife at the hospital, where she was working as medical secretary to my boss, the Consultant physician.

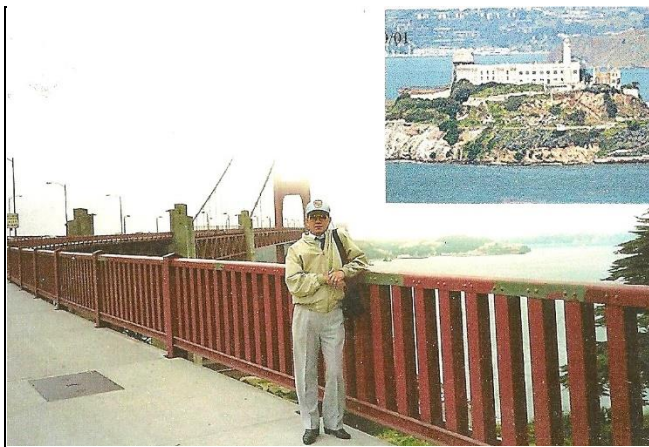
Rather than focussing on my time and events in the UK, which was just ordinary and mundane, and some of which the attached photographs are meant to portray, I want to catch up with a few salient characteristics of Britain.



Author as Delegate to the First International Conference for AIDS in San Francisco in July 1990, with my colleague Dr Mohanty.

Remember the Hippy song? If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear flowers in your hair.

One outstanding feature of Britain is its legal system, which is known to be very fair, and their prisons are very humane. There are no death penalties. Life sentence does not mean life. It is for fifteen years except for rare cases. The convict, however, will be out after serving half of his time as 'paroled' under supervision after serving only half the term, except for certain very serious cases.



Author on San Francisco Bridge. [Inset] the famous Alcatraz prison, 2014

Britain, however, is no more as great economically as it was before WWII, when they had the resources from its Empire. It is no more a great military power, but powerful enough to stand up to any country including Russia and China. Because they have diligence, energy, courage, and military hardware. They have technical expertise for anything. Only the funding is the constraint.

The city of London is not as spectacular as Paris or Rome, but it is steeped in British Imperial history. Britain still, has probably a bigger influence on the modern world than any other nation. Besides, the English language is spoken in 67 countries in the world. Even its old enemy French bureaucrats now, must speak in English for international events.

Apart from the Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London, where they used to behead famous people with an axe, including two wives of Henry VIII, Parliament building is amongst the best tourist attractions in London.

The building that houses both Parliaments in their traditional Gothic style, with its tall Big Ben Tower, is known as the Palace of Westminster. The Parliament is the physical form of the British Constitution and British political life. It is the mother of all parliaments including the Indian ones.

London's famous landmark are Houses of Parliament with its Big Ben clock that has four clock faces. This is as well-known as the Taj Mahal in Agra or the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square are in the centre of London and Soho is the heart of London's night life scene. Here you can spend thousands of pounds in one night or, could be cheated out of thousands of pounds.

Oxford Street is the biggest Shopping Centre. England's world most

famous department store known as *Harrods* is in Kensington at Knightsbridge, about one kilometre away from Oxford Street. It is synonymous with luxury and opulence.

There are several double-decker red London buses that route past the Tower of London and the Parliament Building. Westminster Pier, located beside Westminster Bridge, is a major destination for all visitors to London. It is served by a number of river buses that ply on the river Thames. The Underground Tube train station is also by the Westminster pier.

The story about the London's underground has always been a hallmark of London city life. Thousands that commute to their offices or work places every day, are always in a hurry. They never smile or talk and often read a small book. Now, the commuters fiddle with their mobiles. Those who talk a bit are always foreign visitors.

Another trademark of London is its centuries-old pubs or public drinking places (famous for draught beer). London is full of pubs. An English pub is an integral part of British life, especially student life. The latter sounds an antithesis to student life we know in India.

Students who go to university usually have a budget between 2-3 thousand pounds a year for alcohol and partying on top of the cost for lodging and boarding. Medical students traditionally drink more. If you attend an Oxford or Cambridge students' formal evening dinner, where the students wear formal black gowns, there is a bar inside, where you can buy drinks. My wife and I attended once.

You can have some snacks with your drinks and many pubs serve food as well. Some have games like darts, snookers etc. Some pubs have sing-songs like I was doing in the photograph taken at my local pub.



Author singing his favourite song in the local pub with 5 women friends:
Country roads, take me home to the place I belong, West Virginia, mountain
mama. Take me home, country roads.

There is a pub etiquette. There is no charge for entry. You place your order at the bar. You can either pay cash or use your credit card. You do not tip bartenders. You order your beer or lager by the pint. So, the British usage, 'let's go for a pint', meaning let's go to the pub for a drink.



Jollification at Christmas in a local pub where I was known as Mohinda.
With friends. (L) Elizabeth Nield and (R) Debra Paget.

In the last few years, the popularity of drinking wine either red or white with meals, is rapidly increasing in the British society. At every formal dinner wine is served. The guest will choose red or white. It is because

wine tastes best with food. Research shows that one type of food ie fat has a large impact on wine flavour.



At a wedding reception.

My life has now begun in full swing, albeit in the British way of life, having told my mother that I won't be coming home to stay with her. It was hard.

“Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get.”

