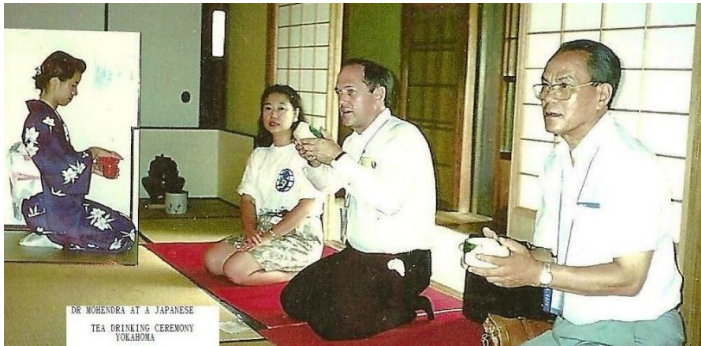




Melei Leisna Nungjumapal
[Khongamelei]

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Chapter 6 Beginning of Life in the UK



The Japanese Tea drinking ceremony in Tokyo in 1993. On my right is the lady guide. A woman in kimono demonstrates how to drink a thick green tea concoction ceremoniously.

Time is becoming of the very essence. The last two years have been the most challenging period in my living memory. This is September, the ninth month of the year of 2021. September is the beginning of autumn in England as it is in Manipur. It is often one of the most temperate weather-wise.

The golden-brown autumn leaves are falling from the trees as they prepare to conserve their energy for the winter. The air is misty with crisp and slightly sharp smell that herald autumn and the squirrels are beginning to bury nuts in preparation for cold weather when food

will be scarce. This season for me, brings a heady mix of nostalgic yearning for home with an abstract melancholy.



At the bibulous felicitation party of Nigel Benn, the Lightweight World Boxing Champion 2008.

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The seasonal change into autumn always evokes a queer emotion in me as it had always done during my boyhood. It is hard to describe. It is like a low-key or subdued feeling, described as 'mellow fruitfulness' by John Keats.

It is due to higher production of Melatonin hormone by the pineal gland in the brain because of less exposure to sunshine. This is the hormone that maintains circadian rhythm or 24-hour body clock. It is the hormone that makes you sleep. In this melatonin induced mood, I intend to write the swansong of my memoir before the weather worsens.

I am aware that I am quite antiquated, but I do remember that even pragmatic men have their dreams, and an old man like me, has his vanities. I have always carried on my shoulder a sizeable and quite unnecessary chip. And I see no reason to stop now. When one tries to be a master of one's destiny, there is always a sting in the tail.

Some of you must have read a small book, *The Alchemist* by the Brazilian Paulo Coelho, which has been translated into 61 languages, and sold 30 million copies worldwide. The popularity of the book seems to be that it advocates one should follow one's own dreams by listening to one's heart. That is what I have done.

I have a small house, comfortable enough for me and my wife. Children, when they finish university (age 18years), do not want to stay at home.



Back of my house

I have toiled for long in writing this memoir. Now the time has come to end it. By now, what with the passing of sunshine and languor of the

spring of my life! And I will do so, by asking myself a question and answering it truthfully, as a kind of self-exploration.

Speaking with flagrant casualness, when the inevitable question comes as to whether I miss my life in Manipur, the answer comes out without having to think about it. Yes, I do very much. But if I am asked which country I prefer to stay in, I get stumped. It is like asking the question of what the difference between a poem and a song is. It is a sticky wicket. However, my answer will be that I like it here because life is so peaceful and ordered.

On the other hand, I have a considered premise that since I am not an economic migrant, my life in Imphal could have been equally good if not better as I had property in land and other resources like paddy fields, bequeathed by my father. It is only a hypothesis. What I know for a fact, is that life is splendid here.

But I can never forget Imphal where I was born. Inside me I feel the same about it now, as I felt in the 1940s. Deep within me is a longing for home, to be at home. It is like 'The call of the Wild' classic novel. In the past, I went to Imphal whenever I could. I miss Imphal now as I have not been able to visit in the last two years because of the Covid pandemic. I am hoping to visit Imphal sometime in the coming winter of this year with my wife and son.

I find it so exciting to see how Imphal has changed so much over the last 80 years. The famous landmarks have disappeared. So have the stereotypes of Meitei national character. Meiteis now have an unshakable historical destiny with incredible cultural creativity. Most of life's amenities that are available in the United Kingdom are now available in Manipur.

As many people in Manipur are also familiar with British habits and values, I will end this last chapter by answering a question that is often asked of me. What do I eat here in the UK? I will also append a gist of

British social welfare system which is unheard of in India and many other European countries. They are the benefits that draw thousands of illegal immigrants every year.

I will deal with the social welfare system first. Though Britain does not have the highest standard of living in the world it does have a fairly high standard, compared to India. In simple terms, because of its average higher income and expenditure, everybody has access to basic services, such as affordable education, safe drinking water, electricity, gas. All kinds of food and vegetables are available every day, despite the season. They are imported from all over the world.

There is adequate health care system for everybody. A well-established social security system caters various facilities for personal care and support to children and adults at risk from illness, disability, old age and poverty.

British society is now egalitarian and secular. Racial prejudice is beginning to ebb. It has become a multi-cultural society. People do not go to church anymore. More and more churches are being closed. There is liberalism and frankness in the basic social structure. There is no longer a stigma for unmarried girls to have children with or without a known husband. The state will provide for the baby and the mother, including a free home.

Going along with this trend, the number of people who remain unmarried, 16 years or over, is continuing to rise by 3.9 million from 2002 to 2017. They have their reasons.

It has now become a social trend for couples to live together for a few years before they get married. It is a spontaneous outcome of the increasing high divorce rates. It is a kind of experiment to see if they are compatible as wife and husband. Four out of ten people end up in divorce sometime in their life. Age is no bar.

Education is compulsory by law up to the age of sixteen. The literacy rate is 99%. It means one in a hundred struggles to read and write. There are 11.7 million educated people (those who have attended colleges and universities).

Education is free for everybody up to the school age of 18. University students must pay about £9,500 per year for tuition fees as well as for accommodation and food. For students whose parents' income falls below a certain amount, they get a full students' loan.

For students who must pay, there is "students' loan" facility from the government which they have to pay back when they begin earning, and that also only when their income goes above the repayment threshold, which is currently £27,295 a year.

An average graduate salary as of 2021 is about £24,000 per annum. That means he/she does not have to repay until the salary come up to £27,295 per year. Many student graduates are unable to pay back, and thus their loan is wiped off after 30 years.

In general, British lifestyle is now highly multinational and generally respectful of all beliefs and cultures. Discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability is against the law. In these aspects the law is very strict. There are 4 social classes: (1) lower class (2) working class (3) middle class and (4) upper class.

The lower class consist of people who are unemployed and homeless. The working class are unskilled or semi-skilled and do physical work and paid by the hour or day. That is why time is money. The middle class consists of (a) upper middle class.

Traditionally they are educated at independent schools and one of the public schools, and who occupy higher place and status in society; and (b) lower middle class with people who are office workers. The Upper class consist of families which have traditionally possessed high salary.

Average British people have a good life. There are many comparatively poor people as well. The British culture, traditions and their habits are very admirable, barring racism, which is now becoming less and less intrusive. They are not in the habit of poking a dirty nose in other people's lives. They live their own life, so to speak. We might not see our next-door neighbour for the duration of the whole winter.

Well, I have now come to the end of my memoir. Having tried to give a nucleus of personal, societal, and national character of the British way of life, I would like to wrap up 'my life in the UK' with a description of an average British food habit as I eat them.

British food habits have changed a lot over time since my arrival in this country. In the past 30 years there have been various exotic foods that have become British cuisine. Currently, Indian gastronomy is their second-best alternative, preferring medium hot dishes like Madras curry in Indian restaurants, swilling down with pints of ice-chilled lager.

Breakfast for an average person is more likely to have a bowl of cereal like cornflakes, Weetabix, or two slices of toast, a cup of coffee or tea or half a glass of orange juice. Many people in winter, particularly Scottish people eat porridge.

A British lunch is between 12:00 and 1.30 pm. This is taken during 'lunch break' hours. Most working people will usually eat a hot meal or sandwiches in the staff canteen. A lot of people have their biggest meal in the evening when they return home from work. Some will stop in a bar for a couple of pints of beer on the way home. Afternoon tea is often drunk with biscuits or piece of cake.

The evening dinner (sometimes called supper) is usually between 6.30 and 8:00 pm. A traditional British Dinner is "meat with two veg". They often go with gravy. One of the vegetables is almost always potatoes, cooked in different ways. The other veg could be boiled peas, carrots,

cabbage, and broccoli and so on. Meat, mostly beef is their main staple food like our rice.

In 1950s and 1960s, before the arrival of Indian food in the Indian restaurants, which were all run by Sylheti Bengalis, it was a nightmare for Indian doctors who did not eat beef or meat of any sort. At the doctors' mess in Hospitals, those Indian doctors who wanted vegetarian food would be provided with boiled peas, potatoes and carrots, and a couple of slices of bread and butter. Muslim doctors, if served with ham or pork, would likewise, just eat boiled vegetables. All Muslim doctors ate non-Halal meat.

Until the late 1970s there was hardly any Indian restaurant except *Veraswami* in Regent Street in London, and another one in Glasgow, where I used to go sometimes, while studying in Edinburgh. Edinburgh is 50 miles (80Km) east of Glasgow.

Nowadays, most people in Britain eat all sorts of Indian curries with rice, biryani, parathas, or naans. During the lockdown all these restaurants sold takeaway meals delivered piping hot and on the dot. They could be booked on-line and pre-paid by credit-card.

It will be sacrilegious to write about Britain without a word about whisky (spelled whiskey in Ireland). I have had the privilege of a tippie every night for the past 30 years until the beginning of Covid lockdown 2 years ago. I am thus qualified to write a bit about it.

While nothing can excuse blatant drunkenness, many of us are partial to getting a little over-refreshed from time to time. A quarter of the British population regularly drink more than the low-risk guideline of 14 units a week. (A 25ml, single whisky or half a pint of beer is one unit).



Home Bar



Lounge

The world-famous Scotch whisky can only be made in Scotland because of the peat, water, and climate. Different glen (Scottish for valley) water imparts different flavour as in Glenmorangie. It must be differentiated that Scot is a Scottish person. Scotch is a whisky. Whisky is the national drink of Scotland while Bitter Beer is for England, and black Guinness beer is for Ireland. Lager is a European beer.

Different tastes and colour of whisky come from the use of peat in the malting process and the type of wood barrel it has been aged in. The longer it has been aged the better is the taste, usually 12 years. The colour comes from the oak wood barrels in which sherry has been stored previously.

Regular whisky drinkers drink it for the taste and get used to the flavour of a certain brand. It is an acquired taste. However, malt whiskies taste better than the common blended whiskies apart from the Black Label. They are also more expensive. A large amount of water or Soda distorts the flavour of whisky.

Over the past 70 years, and after the demise of the Empire, British National Character and British values have mutated. They used to be very polite and helpful, saying please and thank you. Not anymore, especially to immigrants. It is partly due to the environment of living with Asians who are not bothered with that kind of polite behavioural language.

Men's sartorial fashion has become casual except at formal functions like a wedding. There are no more black mourning suits. Women also have given up wearing suits. Following WWII, men and women had stopped wearing hats though women still wear hats at weddings.



From (L) Front: Margaret, Anita, Mary Robson (mother-in-law)
From (L) standing: George Robson (Father-in-law) Author, Neil

Now, the time has come to end *My Memory of Imphal*, in which I have tried to keep other character's point-of-view in mind, to avoid one sided train-of-thought narrative. I have written down what I remember to the best of my ability.

And the last but not the least, I am by nature, very loyal and sincere to my friends, not acquaintances. And I never forget their sincerity. My word is my bond. As always, my moto is, 'I will not be demeaned by anybody [*Ei meena utsitaba yade* in Manipuri]. I know I was falsely arrogant but aesthetically precious. I am by nature flamboyant and open-handed.

When I finished studying in Nainital, I had to leave the place, owing Rs 30.0 to a book shop that lets me have books (novels) on credit. The shop was shut. I could never forget it. I went back after a few years to pay it back with interest. Unfortunately, the owner was dead. I was very disappointed.

In closing, I want to say that it is exhilarating to have a chance to be photographed for this creative *notification* with two of my high achiever nieces, Prof (Dr) Sulochana and Prof (Dr) Ranjana at a café at Lamphel in Imphal in November 2019, just before the outbreak of the Covid pandemic?

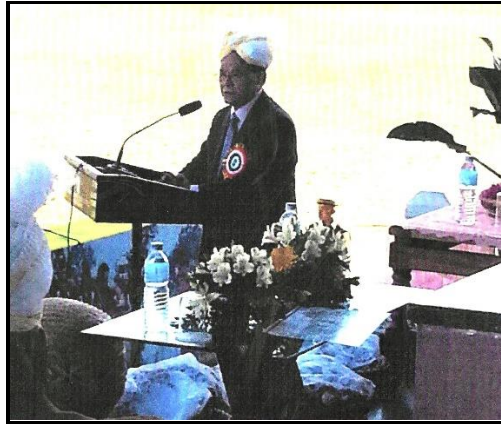


An evening at a café at Lamphel in Imphal on Nov 28, 2019.
(L-R) Ranjana, Sulochana, author, Neil, Margaret.

Before I draw the final curtain, I am pleased with myself that I remain very attached to my place of birth and had visited Imphal almost every year.



At the 9th Int Polo at Mapal Kangjeibung, Imphal, 2015
From (L-R) Neil, Margaret, Author, Col Ranjit & late Shanti Moirangthem



As Guest of Honour at the 10th Int Polo in Imphal, December 2016

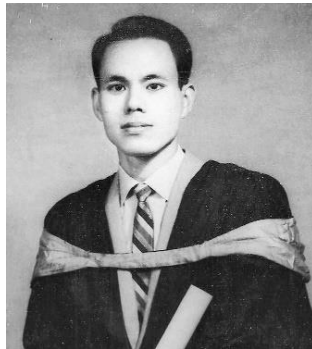


13th Int Polo, Imphal, 2019



14th Int Polo, Imphal, 2022

In this Memoir, I feel privileged to be able to record memories of a few closer friends, many of whom are now dead. The following few are those from whom I parted after the day of Convocation in 1962 in Agra.



Author on the day of Convocation 1962.

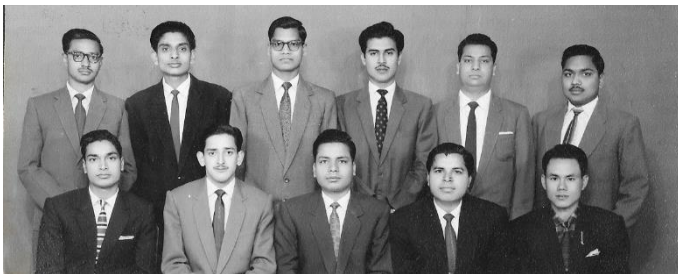


Photo of close friends taken on the day of Convocation 'Lest we Forget'.
We kept in touch all these years until many of them had passed away.

(L-R). Standing: DP Mukherjee, RN Saxena, Bipin Varma, BK Mukherjee, AL Siddiqui, Dinesh Mohan.(L-R) Sitting: SN Srivastava, M A Shawl, GK Jaiswal, Raman Srivastava, I M Singh.



Ravi Nath, author, Gopal Jaiswal in Delhi.

They were Dr Gopal Krishna Jaiswal and his wife Amrit from (Bhadohi) Varanasi, Dr Ravindranath Saxena and his wife Asha from Allahabad. They have become even more endearing.

The last but not the least is Dr Suraj Narayan Srivastava and his wife Pushpa, who live gracefully in Lucknow in their ripe old age. We communicate over the phone by WhatsApp, a couple of times a month, enquiring after each other's health and talking of old days.



Suraj, Pushpa, Margaret & Author at Yamuna Nagar, Haryana.

As I am getting up in years, but still with benefits and challenges, I think more about Manipur Sana Leibak. I am now counting the days when it will be safe to visit Manipur at least once while I am still able to travel. Meanwhile, I take great delight in that thought contextualised and approached,

I am still a brook that runs in its own channel in the vast river in which I am flowing (cf. Chapter 1). I am still a Meitei who maintains my identity in this foreign country of the United Kingdom.

Living abroad has given me some of the best experiences of my life. I was lucky to be able to pack and take a plunge. I chose how I wanted to live. I did it my way. I have achieved my goal. I have no complaints from life.

I would like to close the final curtain with a quote from Frank Sinatra's song, 'My Way'. It represents the quintessential American outlook that nothing in life matters more than living on your own terms.

And now, the end is near,
And so, I face the final curtain.
My friend, I'll say it clear,
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain.
I've lived a life that's full,
I travelled each and every highway,
And more, much more than this
I did it my way.

Thank you for reading.

