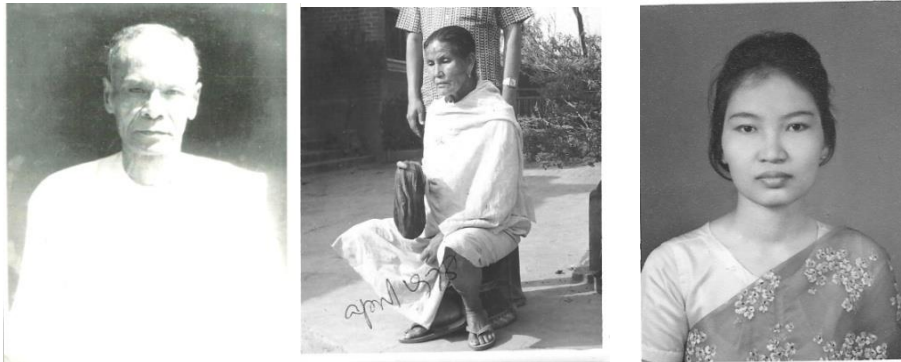


A PRECIS TO END THE SERIES OF MY MEMOIRS OF IMPHAL



In loving Memory of my late Father and late Mother, and in fond memory of my childhood friend, the late Dr Ibetombi, who had endured my sudden escapade to a foreign country.

The book, My Memoir of 411 pages, is some of my recollection of a period in which I was growing up from preteen into teenage years. It was a very small world I knew then, and the more I got older the further it receded into the cosmic void, and the more appealing it retrospectively became. The book is not a collection of historical essays, but some recollection of myself, the memory of the tranquil sleepy town of Imphal and its complacent and easy-going people.

They are not exhaustive, but in varying combinations that are related and not so related. They are undertaken to dabble, but not delve too deeply. I write it as a memoir of what happened in Imphal cum Manipur, eighty years ago. That is beyond the lifetime of an average Manipuri.

I remarked in the original Forward of the book, that I did not find it easy to remember all that happened during that period, when I was a young and callow boy. Besides which, because of my advanced age, I could have failed to lay down many events that I could have written in my endeavour to pen in the story, which took me two years to complete in bits and bats.

This book is little bit about me, telling my story to myself, which has certain advantages and some disadvantages. One advantage of putting me as the narrative nucleus is that it forces me to keep the thread of my rendering in an orderly sequence and in a chronological set up. I can only tell myself what I have seen, heard or done as I grew up. I have not finagled my way through it.

The main disadvantage is that, as I am the central character in the story, many a time I might fail to see that I may be presenting myself as a vainglorious, handsome, and smart fellow as I relate my deeds, which are marked by apparent heroic resolutions, while stupid enough not to see it. I can only say that I, as the author of my own portrayal, see myself from insight, which nobody can. And thus, I can only ask the readers to overlook my shortcomings where they appear to be.

It may also concern the reader that I have perhaps side lined some portions of events in Imphal in the shadowy world of those early post war years. Though I had many things to tell, I was constrained by my desire to prevent the book from becoming too bulky and to avoid the danger of wearying the reader out with my private confidences and personal emotions. The bigger the book the more boring it would be to read.

At the heart of the book, is my desire to paint a rough picture of Imphal and its people in their pristine state, just before and just after the advent of Japanlan in Manipur in 1942. And how the after-effects of the war helped Meiteis to change their worldview. In this effort, some readers might find certain events incongruous to the thematic approach of the narrative. It is because at times, I

have to unmoor myself blindly without some degree of wayfinding beforehand.

In short, my memories stretch back to the arrival of WWII in Manipur in 1942 [Japanlan in Manipuri], during the Japanlan itself, and a short period in the post war years with their immediate consequences on the disorganised Meitei society with the formidable task of rebuilding Imphal town and finding knowledge that was needed to start a new civilisation following a global catastrophe due to WWII.

I have recounted in the book some indications of the importance of Japanlan with its tangible beneficial outcomes for Manipuris, despite the great havoc it caused in Asia and the Pacific. Broadly speaking, Japanlan had brought a change in the worldview of Meiteis in their understanding of the world in terms of religion, ideologies, and science itself, which because of the efforts of waging a world war, had now moved on to a new stage. For Manipur, it had brought freedom from British Rule, albeit indirectly, sprouted the concept of democracy and the rule of law with human rights.

This review is thus, mainly related to the Japanlan as it was incident in Manipur. I believe, such commemoration at the present time of unimaginable progress in Imphal, while preserving and celebrating various aspects Meitei cultural and environmental heritage, is perhaps of some value historically.

As we all can see all the modern advances and innovations that have come to Imphal after the Japanlan, my main aim in this precis is to annotate why and how the Japanese came all the way to Imphal.

The Japanlan was the harbinger of a profound change in the political, cultural, religious, and social aspects of Meiteis. It brought a new dawn for the people in the valley and the hills of Manipur. My book is only a very brief survey of a broad subject, some are only in headlines, and as such it is inevitably an oversimplified account.



Gen William Slim who defeated the Japanese on land. His Cottage in Kangla, Imphal, from where he directed the Allied Army to defeat the Imperial Japanese Army.

Perhaps, I might try to acquaint the young readers very briefly, about the advent of Japanlan to Imphal in 1942.

It was towards the fag end of WWII in the east, which was fought between the invincible Japanese Army and the Allied Forces, around the slumberous town of Imphal. This was known in military history as THE BATTLE OF IMPHAL, which was fought between March 8 to July 3, 1944. WWII ended on September 2 1945 (see later).

The Nippon Army in 1942, nearly stopped the British singing their patriotic song, "*Rule, Britannia*". This 'invincible' Imperial Japanese Army marching all the way from Japan with their lightning assaults

through Southeast Asia, routing the proud British Imperial troops stationed there and then sneaking through the Jungles of Burma, to the outskirts of Imphal.

'Rule, Britannia!' is a British patriotic song, which originated from a 1740 poem: 'Rule, Britannia! Britannia rule the waves. The song begins with the lyrics 'When Britain first, at Heaven's Command, arose from out the azure main... Rule Britannia, Britannia, rule the waves... Britons never, never, shall be the slaves.'

The Japanese made a two-pronged thrust from Mandalay to Imphal, and another to Kohima to cut the food and ordnance supplies to the Allied Army from mainland India via the Manipur Railhead at Dimapur in Assam (now in Nagaland). I used to get quite a thrill as a boy whenever I saw the signboard, 'Manipur Station' after I alighted from a train.

The top brass in the Japanese Army in Tokyo believed that once they got hold of the eastern part of India, especially Bengal (because of Bengali Netaji Subhas Chandra Boss and his Indian National Army, known as INA), the rest of India would rise and fight against the British rule.

This, they could do only by defeating the stronghold of the Allied Army in Imphal and at Kohima, by cutting off supplies of food and ordnance that would be brought by train and downloaded at the 'Manipur Station'. Believing in the invincibility of the Imperial Japanese Army, and very confident of quickly capturing Imphal that, they came with only limited supply of food. They planned to use the provisions stored in Imphal for the Allied Army.

They were so sure of winning the Battle of Imphal that a few geisha girls were kept ready in Mandalay for entertaining top Japanese officers in Imphal after the victory.

As the fighting towards and for the Battle of Imphal was much longer than what they planned, many Japanese soldiers were starved to death. Many of them sustained simply on soup of boiled grass (protein content about 20%) The Battle of Imphal was a turning point for the Japanese. They suffered 54,879 casualties, including 13,376 dead. There were 4,064 British and Indian soldiers who died at this battle.

Among those who survived, some of them were decimated by diseases, such as Malaria, Amoebic dysentery, Typhoid, and others. The Japanese were not aware of the prevalence of Malaria, like Allied Army that had plenty of anti-Malaria pills, known as Quinin. Every evening the soldiers would fall in when a non-commissioned officer (NCO) would throw an antimalarial tablet into each mouth to swallow without any water.

The Japanese also had a short supply of aircrafts as had the British. But there were plenty of Dakota planes for food and ordnance supplies including fresh water, provided by the USAF (United States Air Force), and piloted by young American pilots in their early twenties. In Imphal, they were distinguishable by their flamboyant demeanours, rolling their mouths with chewing gums, and wearing green Aviation sunglasses. They wore light tan and slightly yellowish Khaki poplin uniforms. Their trousers were without front pleats, and the matching shirts had two flapped chest pockets and no epaulettes. They had matching web belts to go with the trousers. After the war, I wore such an outfit, stitched from the left-over war supplies.

The US initially refused British request to join WWII, but was kicked in by the Japanese, after a massive bombing of Pearl Harbour at Honolulu in Hawaii in the Pacific. It was a surprise attack by the Japanese Naval Air Service at 8.30 a m, on December 7 1941. The Japanese under (General) Tojo Hideki as the Prime Minister, saw in the German invasion of the Soviet Union a paramount

opportunity to wage an aggressive war in the Far East and Southeast Asia, without danger of an attack upon their rear by the forces of the Red Army.



Gen Douglas MacArthur who defeated the Japanese in the Pacific, Japanese surrender on Sept 2 1945 on the American Ship USS Missouri.

The end of the Japanese dream of an Asian Empire began with the defeat of the Japanese overland, at the *Battle of Imphal*. It was like the 'Battle of Trafalgar' when the British Navy defeated the proud French and Spanish fleet off the Cape of Trafalgar in the southwest of Spain.

At sea, the Japanese navy was also defeated by the American navy at the *Battle of Midway* in the Pacific in June 1942. Midway is an island near Hawaii, in direct line between the US and Japan. It was a naval battle but fought almost entirely with aircrafts.



The Japanese Army thrust from Mandalay to Imphal and Kohima in 1944.
(Photo credit: Public Domain)

On land, the Battle of Imphal was the last desperate attempt for the Japanese, to keep the war going to capture India. Imphal thus became the focus of the British Commonwealth soldiers fighting the Japanese, who made a two-pronged attack to Imphal and Kohima simultaneously from Mandalay.

They fought the British and Indian troops at Kohima, which kept the supply line to Imphal from Dimapur open. It was also quite a battle, which was fought from April 4 – June 22 1944. The Japanese had 5,764 dead while the British and Indian soldiers amounted to 4,064 dead. It was a very fierce fighting for strategic reasons.

When I went to Kohima in 1949, I saw the famous and touching epitaph on an erect stone to commemorate the fallen British soldiers. It read: "When you go home, Tell them of us and say, For your tomorrow, We gave our today." It was on a flat face of a hillock. Nearby, was also a flat stone slab, on which the footprints of Maharaj Gambhir Singh of Manipur were sculpted. On it stood erect, another stone slab with carved figures and writings in Bengali script (C. 1879-80 CE). This was a monument of Gambhir's subjugation of the Nagas of Naga Hills.



WWII Monument in Kohima (1944)



Maharaj Gambhir Singh's Monument (c. 1879-80 CE).

The fall of Imphal would have been perhaps, the end of the British Raj in India and the establishment of a Japanese Empire for years to come. For Indians, it would have been only a change of their masters from white to yellow. After losing over two million soldiers dead and spending an incredible amount of money (956,000 billion USD), the Japanese were not going to hand over India to Subhas on a silver platter. Like the British Empire the Japanese wanted to create an Asian Empire while the Germans created a European Empire.

The Japanese described their first ever defeat in a major war, with a lament: 'Imphal, a flower on a high peak, *Takane no hana*. Meaning something out of reach.

In retrospect, it was good for Manipuris that the Japanese came to Manipur. The Japanese helped Manipuris to discover the world without having to travel all over it. To Manipuris, who were essentially cut off physically from the rest of the world by nine skeins of Himalayan mountain ranges, and who were living mendaciously in their microcosm of Manipur, it was such an unexpected exposure to the world at large.

As if it was not enough, the history of the Japanese cutting off the 4th Corps of the British Army in Manipur from the rest of the world in early 1944, is a gripping tale of their courage and endurance. Imphal became a warzone with crumbling buildings, rubbish heaps and all kinds of military trucks packed with soldiers passing through it en route to other parts of Manipur, and to the Burma border.



The routes the Japanese took to come to Imphal and Kohima.

(Photo credit: Farhiz Karanjawala. The Battle of Imphal, 1944).

The centre of Imphal town was deserted after the first bombing in 1942. Imphalites fled to nearby villages to escape the war. Town Centre was left to thieves until Political Agent Gimson sent Gurkha sentries from Kangla.

Imphalites eventually returned in 1945-46. Schools were open in 1945 as most people had returned to Imphal and people from outer Imphal did not flee at all. Singjamei and Kongba Bazaars took the place of Khwairamband Bazaar that was still deserted. The only private Bengali School for children of Bengalis living at Babupara was vacant as they had gone back to Bengal. It continued to serve as a big military canteen where we used to buy novelties.

Japanlan finally ended in the Pacific on August 15 1945 when the Americans defeated them after dropping two small atomic bombs, one in the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6 1945 and the other three days later, in the city of Nagasaki on August 9 1945.

Manipur remained a war-torn battlefield with pockets of Indian sapper units after the British and most of the Indian and Gurkha troops had been evacuated. Many Meitei families from the centre of Imphal could not still return as their houses like ours, were occupied by the remnants of the unarmed Indian army. When our family did return home in the beginning of 1946, there was a Muslim unit in the homesteads near the main Uripok road.

Following the war, boys in Imphal including me, began to feel the impact of the war, especially of the Americans, in dress and mannerisms. Young Meiteis, who were innately mechanical and quick to learn, soon reassembled many trucks, jeeps, and motorbikes that, by 1947 Imphal was full of them. My eldest brother had a jeep with which I learnt to drive. The sleepy Imphal town was converted into a modern town with the knick-knacks left over from the war.

The war bewitched the Meitei nation. The immediate post war Imphal was the equivalent of peeling onions, removing the unpalatable coverings, unearthing the generations of hopes and regrets. Its tranquil surface belied soul-swelling depths. Literary biopic paterfamilias began to riposte to common social and cultural topics.

There was a natural movement towards modifying traditional beliefs in accordance with modern ideas, and deliberate rejection of the styles of the past, such as an increasing adoption of wearing trousers instead of *phijom* (dhoti) and a change in unmarried girls' *Mangka-style* or Moirang Thoibi *haircut* to the universal combed-back. There was liberalism and relaxation in religious orthodoxy, such as allowing Muslims and tribal people in Brahmin-run restaurants and Meitei homes.

Even my father had done away with the pre-war orthodoxy of his conventional Vaishnavism creed. He cordially accepted my English wife Margaret as his daughter-in-law inside his house. Because of the war and his liberalism (never asked me to pray or go to the Mandir), I became an agnostic. He never insisted on my being religious.

As my wife is also agnostic, we have raised our children without any religion. It is up to them to believe or not to believe in the existence of a God of some kind. Majority of British are agnostics now. Most of the churches throughout the country are now closed as there are no churchgoers. Christmas is for children to receive lots of presents, and for adults, merrymaking, and partying with lots of booze and sumptuous fare.

Another significant impact of WWII in Manipur was the change in the audio-visual films of entertainment in the cinemas. Bengali films in cinema halls were the first accessible audio-visual entertainment after the audio device of the Gramophone. The contraption played Bengali songs that were recorded on spiral grooves running from the periphery to near the centre on a flat disk, made of Shellac before it was replaced by vinyl.



HIS MASTER'S VOICE GRAMPPHONE
(Photo credit: pinterest.com)

The first gramophone available in Imphal before the War was His Maste'rs Voice – a wooden box with a large replaceable brass funnel and a winding handle. We had one. It played a long record with 58 rpm. Later, after the War, portable gramophones became available. It was quite humorous for people who heard the song played on the gramophone for the first time. They began looking around for someone hiding and singing personally from somewhere nearby.

Before the war, Cinema Halls in Imphal, screened mostly Bengali films as Meiteis were fluent in Bengali because it was the medium of instruction in schools. Odd Hindi films were also shown, like *Bandhan* starring Ashok Kumar and Lila Chitnis, which I went to see with my brother. From 1944 onwards, no Bengali films were shown because of Hindi/Urdu speaking soldiers.

By 1945 many Meiteis including me, had a working knowledge of Hindi because of the war, to enjoy Hindi films. From 1946 Cinema halls screened Hollywood films. I saw Romeo and Juliet with Norma Shearer at the MNB Cinema Hall. Exposure to Hindi and English films helped Manipuris to develop an ebbing consciousness that the world is vast with people of different races, colours, features, religions, politics, and cultures.

The post war period promised greater equality and diversity among the Manipuri people. It was a time of enormous social and economic upheaval. Education began in earnest in 1944 with the opening of various high schools. There was an engagement and a willingness among parents to fight for their children's higher education. They began to understand different ways and complexities of life. To top it all, there was an increased awareness among the uneducated parents for positive parenting with higher education for their children.

The educated Manipuris saw a new dawn of modernity and began to harbour a neo-political frame of mind. The resurgence of Imphal began in 1946 with the reconstruction of Imphal town centre. New buildings have come up amazingly fast with shops at the Maxwell and Sadar Bazaars with goods imported from Calcutta. The shops which were all owned before the war, by the Marwaris, were now in the hands of inexperienced Manipuris, though born without business acumen.

The three cinema halls were the audio-visual schools for young children, and entertainment for adults. The three drama halls produced highly tuned actors and actresses, providing relaxation for Imphal residents, while imparting visual information process, with underlying creative and thinking skills.

The Imphal town has caught up with the image of a modern Indian town with paved roads and automobiles. Increasingly, hill dwellers have come down to live at the town centre. The high schools had many students from the interior of the hills.

The enthusiasm for modernity was not like watching a favourite movie in high definition. It was real and a de facto presence. It was a fascinating window on a lost Manipuri civilisation. Consequently, some educated Manipuris about this time, began to put politics into their heads and dabble in it. And, because they were novices, they could not turn the pumpkin into a coach like Cinderella's.

By 1947, Calcutta-printed newspapers like Amrita bazaar Patrika, Jugantar Patrika, Hindustan Times and Statesman were available daily in Imphal. Modern sports became regular events. By 1950, 'Birla Airlines' introduced daily flights to Imphal and back to Calcutta via Gauhati, keeping Manipuris more in touch with the rest of India. Most families by this time, owned a radio to listen to daily news and Manipuri songs broadcast from Gauhati. A scientific revolution had just started albeit lately, among the hoi poloi.

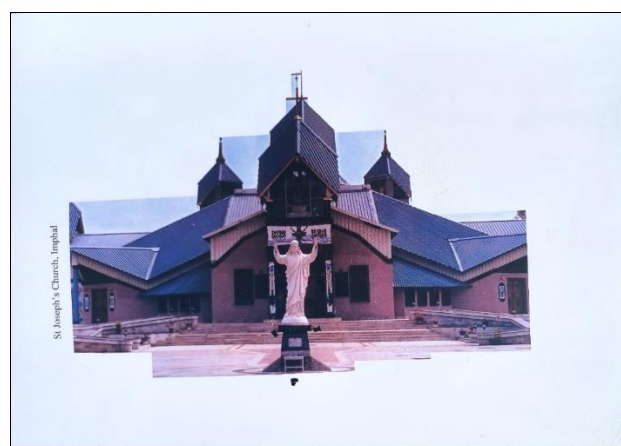
Manipuris owe a great deal to *Japanlan*. Without it Manipuris (Indians) might still be struggling for a while for independence from Britain. It is a piece of quasi-fiction that the behaviour of the Manipuri youth, who are now in their eighties, formed the first phalanx in a major character upheaval of Meiteis.

These young intelligent Meitei brains shaped and defined a new Meitei culture by their subjective experiences of the *Japanlan*, built up on the traditions of our ancestors, and fomented by the ensuing environment created by WWII.

Intelligence (IQ Score) has been steadily increasing among the generations of Manipuris following the *Japanlan*, in my opinion. There is a tremendous negative difference in intellect when I was 10 years old in comparison to one now in 2022. It is a fact, as worldwide statistics prove it. "Between 1959 and 1979 the gains in IQ were 3 **points per decade**. Between 1979 and 1989 the increase approached 2 IQ points. Between 1989 and 1998 the gain was about 1.3 points.

It might be that human beings with more evolved brains became more intelligent in evolutionary terms. Or it might be due to improved diets, better health, and modernisation of our society with various technologies as an adaptation to environment. It might be due to both.

Finally in closing, my thesis statement reiterates that the *Japanlan* that came to Manipur 80 years ago, brought enlightenment with neo geopolitical events, a relaxed attitude towards a secular world view, equally upon Meiteis and fellow tribal communities living in the hills. I have not written much about our fellow countrymen in the hills, simply because I do not know about them, but I am very positive that similar progress has been happening in their societies.



St Joseph's Church, Imphal. I was thrilled to see it. I was educated at St Joseph's in Darjeeling.

But I do know that for hill-dwellers in Manipur, there was an intense arousal for higher education, a belonging, dreams of equality, fairness, and justice, and to be able to freely choose Jesus Christ and follow his ways. Christianity has indeed, come to Manipur, especially in Imphal. It is there to stay. And it is a good thing, a lasting effect of the Japanlan.

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