

My “Good Old Days” In School Shyamal Roy, 1967

My early memories of the school were that of a sprawling campus with big fields, a hospital-like building flanked by symmetrical rooms on either ends, long corridors, two big dormitories, a hall with a stage and a cinema screen on the wall, a chapel and a grotto of Virgin Mary.

One evening, sometime in the mid-fifties, a tall European in white gowns led my father briskly through the school building with my mother and my two elder brothers and myself in tow. His every smile revealed a golden tooth. Brother O’conor was introducing my parents and us – the first non-Christian students and first day-scholars to be taken – to the school.

Br O’conor could not hide his joy when we wanted to visit the chapel. I remember kneeling down and praying to the almighty as my mother whispered something into my ears. In a few months, we were almost daily visitors to the chapel sprinkling ourselves with the holy water of the Nile with palm leaves.

Almost all the teachers, even in the kindergarten, were Irish Brothers. I am not sure how we toddlers communicated with them but everything went smoothly. Most of the time were spent making small objects with plastycine. In fact, I can still smell it.

School use to begin at nine in the morning and end at three in the afternoon. There use to be a five-minute break at 10.30 am. followed by a one-hour lunch at noon. Classes used to resume at 1pm. There was also a break at 2.30 pm. The new building was yet to come up and the big fields gave us ample scope for playing to our heart’s content. There were many trees and hedges that lined the road from the gate to the school building. Monkeys and the squirrels were our best friends but sometimes we got into trouble with the simians. Often squirrels would come down the trees and eat right from our hands before scampering away. A few boarders, however, tamed the squirrels and kept them as pets. Often a squirrel will peep out of the shirt of a boarder much to the delight of the entire class but to the annoyance of the class teacher.

Initially, no marks were given in the examinations. Green, Blue, Yellow and Red cards were the only report cards. Green denoted very good, blue meant good, yellow was a warning to straighten up and red indicated failure. Since almost all the teachers were Irish, their accent sometimes posed problems for us when we moved to a higher class. It used to take quite a few days to get accustomed to their accent. But the Brothers were kind and took no umbrage if someone failed to understand him.

There used to be a stationary room from where boarders were given all their requirements. Dayschollars were sometimes helped with pencils and rubbers, of course on a deferred payment. To be frank, many of us took the liberty not to pay back. At lunch time kites (where have they gone now) swooped down on unmindful students who ventured with any foodstuff on the fields. Sometimes, students used to be injured and were treated in the school's mini-hospital. There used to be an Irish nurse at the hospital. I can almost feel her caring hands when she washed my hand with water after I developed high temperature one day in school. Saturday used to be half-day with classes ending at 11.30 a.m. In the evening, films, such as the Ten Commandments, Reach For The Sky and Bridge on The River Kwai, used to be shown. Br. Murray with his projector on the cemented-lawn or inside the hall was a familiar sight to us. I owe much of whatever I have mastered in the English language to Br. Murray. I still remember one of his model essays that used to be given in the class – The Railway Station, where a ticketless passengers was trying to impress the ticket-collector with a “fairy tale”.

Br. Oshea was a principal dreaded by everybody – even parents. He always had a cane tucked into his robe belt. Perhaps, there was not a single student who did not had a taste of his cane because Br. Oshea used it liberally. Then there was the soft-spoken Br. Bella whose untying the wrist-watch from his first arm was sure to spell hell for us. I met both of them in later years. How mellowed they seemed. But they were kind souls who helped us to stand up in life.

There also used to be one Mr. Dutta who was in-charge of the technical school and also taught us drawing and woodcraft on Friday evenings. There was a Sarkar Babu who looked after the accounts. Once on such a Friday evening, I and a few classmates were attracted by a bunch of papayas on a tree near the Principal's office. As others left, we tried to climb up the tree but it came crashing down with a big thud. The next moment we ran a marathon with Br. Murray behind us swearing to ring our necks. The next morning, the entire class was lined up to be identified by a Nepali *durwan* to find out the culprits. But the *durwan* feigned ignorance. Thank you friend.

The school's football teams were the best in my time. We used to troop down to St. Xavier's ground to cheer the five-three and four-ten teams. Br. Murray should get the honors. He also organized the sports a colourful annual event, especially the drill display of Dum Dum. Br. Kelly (he taught my two older brothers also) in St. Josephs', Br. Rozario, Br. Ash, Br. Pinto, Br. Alvarez - I can just rattle off the names. But like the school, Dum Dum has also changed. The plaintive sound of the stream engines in the lazy afternoons are gone. The shops lighted up by hachak lamps are missing. The Lila cinema hall where I saw the Invincible Man and The Frankenstein on 65 nayapaise tickets has also lost much of its charm. However, nostalgia will remain forever.