

St Mary's – A collage of Memories

Suprakash Datta, 1985

PROLOGUE: A friend from St. Mary's asked for articles on our school days for a souvenir for a reunion. I agreed to write one. The problem was that the last time I wrote a non-technical article or essay was close to two decades ago. I asked my friends from St. Mary's about their recollections; most were sadly unenthusiastic. I asked my wife what she would do if she were asked to write a similar article on her school. She said that she would write about memorable teachers. Not being particularly imaginative, that is what I decided to do.

THE EARLY YEARS: My first days in St. Mary's started off unexpectedly. My parents had chosen this school because there was a bus (state bus 11A) that passed our house en route to its terminus near Dum Dum station. Before I attended my first class, however, metro railway started tearing up Calcutta and that bus never passed our house again. The only ways for me to get to St. Mary's were by changing buses either at Shyambazar or Nagerbazar. The upside was I made two disjoint sets of friends, one on each route.

Class I in St. Mary's was uneventful. I do have clear memories of the very kind and maternal Mrs. Ghosh bending down and untying the shoelaces of student after student to make sure that their claim of being able to tie their shoes was accurate. Sadly a large number of these claims were less than truthful, and she had to tie their laces herself! I am sure this was not part of the official curriculum. The same holds for Ms. Iype in class II, who checked that the mothers who brought warm lunches for us did not actually feed us. She also taught us to check the area around our seats before going home to make sure that we were not leaving anything behind in the class. I always remember her when I check out of a hotel or leave a public terminal room.

From class III onwards, I started cultivating good work habits. Mrs. Sengupta was a nice teacher but she often let Mr. Crouch loose on us; the latter reveled in innovative torture techniques – I remember the traumatic fear of getting beaten up rather well. However, we also had Mr. Payne teaching us English songs. While I could never hold a tune, I can clearly see him singing "Clementine" beautifully.

Class IV was rather eventful. Mr. Smyth was a wonderful person and a good teacher. He was also what my children would call "a very cool guy" (in my days I did not know what "cool" and "guy" meant). He had served in the armed forces but was very accessible and affable. I remember Mr. Smyth whenever I make a mistake in class and acknowledge it – Mr. Smyth marked a problem in my math exam wrongly and deducted marks. My father dared to meet him and point out the mistake. Many others would refuse to reappraise the exam or acknowledge the error. Mr. Smyth not only gave me the marks but also thanked my father in class the next day for correcting him! Both Mr. Smyth and Mr. Cooper (who also served in the military) regaled us with wonderful tales from the battlefield... Some years later, I became an avid reader of "Biggles" books to read similar stories.

In the same class, I reacted unexpectedly to some ribbing in class and punched a good friend in the eye, breaking his glasses. This all happened very quickly and obviously was not premeditated (yes, I have watched far too many courtroom dramas). While some teachers had ludicrous, over-the-top reactions, Mr. Smyth was very nice and supported me completely. My friend happened to leave St. Mary's the next year. Years later, we went to college together and remained good friends. Both of us chuckled about the incident, which to me said volumes about Mr. Smyth's handling of it.

I left St. Mary's very early in class V – my father was transferred to Shillong and my family moved there with him. Shillong was an idyllic place and we liked it immediately. In fact we planned to stay there until I finished school. So my St. Mary's days were to be over. A strange turn of events -- communal violence and long-term deployment of armed security forces in Shillong -- made it impossible for us to live there. And so it was back to St. Mary's, under unexpected circumstances.

THE LATER YEARS: I returned to St. Mary's in class VIII, but in section B this time. It took me some weeks to make new friends, and to get used to Mr. Francis' methods. Mr. Francis had been the class teacher of this group of students for two years before I joined and the class knew his idiosyncrasies well. I did not. I was never very neat and I remember being asked to "say hi to the pigs on Dum Dum Road" and to sit next to a neat classmate to see how it is done. I quickly adapted and caught up. I have spent two decades after leaving St. Mary's in educational institutions, as a student and then as a teacher and Mr. Francis easily ranks among the five best teachers I have ever met. I could write pages on this wonderful person but will defer that for another time. If anyone has his contact information in Australia, please send it to me. Apart from his teaching skills, he was the only teacher to finish his lunch very early and join the students on the playing field, cheering on teams from his class loudly, and sternly pulling up people for undisciplined behavior. He also went beyond far beyond his duties in organizing football tournaments after class.

Class IX reorganized the class (both sections) into a Science stream and a non-Science stream. The reorganization was an artifact of the latest board experiment, and has been discontinued. While many others found it hard to adjust to new classmates, I had it easy – I was the only student who had studied with everyone before. Much more significantly, this class introduced us to Brother Kyle. Easily the most charismatic and impressive personality I have ever met, he took the class by storm. To this day, the first thing that St. Mary's alumni say at a get-together is "remember what Brother Kyle used to say about this?" He intrigued, impressed and terrified people. His caustic nature was coupled with a rapier sharp wit. He motivated by sarcasm, and I suspect, defied all pedagogic principles. Yet, it worked amazingly well. We were a bunch of awkward adolescents struggling to impress the man who was never impressed, and we never gave up. It is almost hard for me to remember that Brother Kyle taught us English. Many of these classes were memorable, especially ones where he selected passages for dictation from outside our texts. Sadly, my writing was far from good, and so were my tastes in many ways. There are two incidents worth mentioning. Once, I was reading in class a book on writing and grammar written for American students. Brother Kyle saw this and the look on his face

was priceless – few Brits would acknowledge that American books on writing were worth reading, but Brother Kyle was not one of them. The second incident occurred when I wrote an essay on my favorite TV program, which at that particular time happened to be “The Lucy Show”. While I am ashamed of this today, there were few TV programs worth watching in the single TV channel that we got, and fewer still were shown at the times when we could watch TV. Brother Kyle called me up and essentially said with a deeply disappointed face that only a moron could like that show.

Most of us grew up a lot in classes IX and X. We realized that it was almost time to venture into the hostile “outside world” where the first task was to find a place to study for the next two years. We in the Science stream were exposed to serious Science. Professor Dasgupta and Mr. Bhattacharya taught us Physics, Chemistry and Biology. Professor Dasgupta had been a Professor in Shillong most of his life and left under unpleasant circumstances. The son of the first Pharmaceutical Chemist in India, he was an exceptional scientist who studied Chemistry but loved Mathematics and Physics. He did not talk much about himself, and so most students did not know his background (I knew his background from some mutual acquaintances in Shillong). It was not surprising that he hated teaching ICSE-level Physics and Chemistry and expected students to read the book and ask him to get doubts cleared. I am glad that I listened to him. He stimulated in me the desire and the confidence to study Science, and be an educator. Even more importantly, we had conversations that formed my thinking on things very far from Physics and Chemistry. One example stands out: one of my classmates brought to class an issue of a magazine that was, at least in the very conservative standards of Indian society in the 1980’s, not suitable for fifteen year olds. Professor Dasgupta engaged in a long conversation on morality and ethics that had a deep impact on me. I learnt for the first time the deviant ethics one of the founders of modern Bengal. A young boy was growing up fast. One of my biggest regrets is not being able to thank him for all his help – Professor Dasgupta, in the extremely rare event that you are reading this article, your contributions are sincerely acknowledged and deeply cherished.

There was another teacher (sadly I only remember his first name, Soumitra) who taught us commerce. Given that we viewed this subject as something we were forced to study by the quirky ICSE board, his class was surprisingly good. I deliver lectures on Computer Security in which I have to convince unimaginative students on how diabolical imagination can find ways to wreck havoc. Invariably, I remember the lecture delivered by Soumitra (on Banking) about how bank fraud can be carried out and why some of the arcane bank rules prevent some of these schemes. It was an eye opener and I remember much more of this course than I thought I would at that time.

I also owe much to our Bengali teacher, Ms. Ghosh. I loved Bengali literature before she taught us, but she encouraged me a lot and I remain an avid reader to this day.

EPILOGUE: We left St. Mary’s and spread out to different schools and colleges. I attended St. Joseph’s briefly. One day, a friend from St. Mary’s, who was sitting next to me, managed to make a large noise by slamming a part of a window. It was purely accidental, but the Principal heard this and dismissively said that it was expected of

people from the “mofussil”, referring to the location of St. Mary’s. I went back to St. Mary’s once or twice but in time we had new lives and schools and slowly lost contact. I came to the USA for graduate school and then started working in Canada. I have children, and one of them will be starting first grade in a few days. I hear about the scandals of the Catholic Church and proudly remember how different the Christian Brothers in St. Mary’s were. I encounter aggressive evangelization in the streets and recall fondly how secular our education was.

Sometimes, in the midst of the stifling busy life of today, there are pleasant surprises. One of them was when a bunch of our classmates got together on the Internet. Among them is a cancer surgeon, a few professors, a researcher in a National Laboratory in the US, entrepreneurs, very well-placed people in software and other industries and school teachers, both in India and abroad. I hear of nostalgic get-togethers in Calcutta and elsewhere. I see emailed photos of successful men and see in my mind’s eye very young classmates. I think of my St. Mary’s days and see a bright young boy waiting to grow up. I recall vividly waiting in Nagerbazar and Shyambazar for a connecting bus in the sweltering heat of Calcutta. We were a middle-class family and cars or even taxis were out of the question, even when I was not in the best of health. Then, when I drive across my favorite places in the Canadian Rockies with my family, savoring the open skies, the vast open spaces and away from the pressures of the busy life, I tell myself “It has been quite a journey from the hot, shadeless bus stop in Shyambazar to the airconditioned comforts across the world, and somehow St. Mary’s contributed to this. How do I say thank you to St. Mary’s and the other schools I went to?”

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