

My School Days

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I was just about three when my parents sent me to a place that looked and felt like a cage. The idea of being locked, for what seemed like eons, made me the most difficult child in the neighbourhood. And no matter what toys my parents promised every morning, I remained adamant.

Well, that was my first school. Although I do not remember my first day in school, memories of being dragged to the gates every morning are still fresh. One day, my mother took me to a playground. It was so big that I could barely see the far end. Then she asked me, 'How about having this place as your school'?

I was surprised. School meant match-box-like unventilated rooms where grim-looking characters called 'teachers' kept tormenting kids. 'If this playground is a school, I would love to be in school all the time', I replied instantly. Then my mother threw in a caveat, 'in that case you have to take a test and qualify'. I did not know what that meant. But I was determined to get a passport to this lovely place.

Today, as I stand near the school office, I can see myself holding my parents' hands and walking in with wide-eyed curiosity. It was also the first time I saw someone in a cassock. As I stepped back in awe, Brother Ward took my hand and shook it vigorously. He had a smile that instantly broke the ice. I felt quite at home sitting across his table and fiddling with his pens, stapler, paperweights and whatever else was within my little-hand reach.

I do not remember what he asked, though I do recall asking him a few questions of my own in Bengali to which he replied in his own tongue. However, we both seemed to happily understand each other. Thus I was adopted by St Mary's.

This was to be my new school. Every nook of this huge campus was calling out to me. The class rooms awaited newer voices to resonate with. The benches awaited newer tales to listen to. The corridors awaited newer feet to scamper across their heart and grow into life. Everything stood still as if waiting for a breath.

It seemed but yesterday that Miss D'Vas welcomed us to her KGB. At that time I had no idea what either Kindergarten or the Soviet intelligence service was. However, even now, I call the class KGB. The room had an attractive blackboard with a set of multi-coloured lines painted on the left half for cursive writing and a number of boxes on the right for number work, just like our exercise books.

KGB was a happy class. There were songs, stories, games and painting. In the midst of it all, there were exams, too, which we never realized were exams at all. There was an

element of fun even in our report cards. Miss D'Veas handed us our reports on our own bits of creativity – handmade paper craft. So at times our results were on a flower while on other occasions it was on a railway train.

Going to school in Dilip kaku's (uncle's) school bus early morning was a pleasant experience. Our bus took a long route picking me up from Northern Avenue and rolling across Tala, Patipukur, Lake Town and Dum Dum Park. And there was my classmate Shanu who kept excitedly pointing to the huge building looming on Jessore Road, opposite Dum Dum Park. He called it 'the beautiful building'. Gradually, our beautiful building became a cinema hall, the Shelly cinema.

The school "assembly" was an impressive sight. Except for KG that lined up on the corridor behind, the entire school assembled on the basketball court – it seemed like a huge child in a navy blue uniform. The arrival of Brother Ward in his usual white cassock and the attendant 'pin drop' silence signaled that it was 8:20 am. He took his usual position on the podium and wished everyone a Good Morning to which we answered in a chorus. Then he summoned the school captain. The prayer, 'Direct we beseech thee Oh Lord' is a religion of every Marian.

Come class one, and our school day was extended to seven periods from the four in KGB. This was further extended by one period, to eight, from class two onwards. We had a twenty-minute break in-between. And so it was time to explore! Pink-nosed rabbits scurried in and out of the small enclosures near the statue of Mother Mary. Then there was the swimming pool with its clear blue water. Going all the way to the 'New Building' and peeping into the workshop opposite was quite an adventure. There was the famous 'Buddha' selling 'alu kabli' and the ice cream wallah with his Magnolia ice creams near the workshop.

It was Rajarshi who first discovered a chapel upstairs and took me there. I was fascinated by the silence. Once inside, you would not know that a floor below, the rest of the school was carrying on with its usual noisy day. The Belgian glasses on the walls around made one feel that fluorescent lamps were on.

Those were the days of simple joys and sorrows. The Pandav Goendas, the Tintins, the Famous Fives all seem entwined with that period. I recall Meher Gopal's story of the ghost his grandmother drove out of their village house.

I can see my mother waiting with other parents at breaks during the exams. I can hear Dipto grumbling about his 'Tintin in America' that Soumitra sir confiscated as punishment for reading it in class. How exciting were the art and craft exhibitions, the sports days and the picnics! What a celebration it was when we were first allowed to write with an ink pen when in class four! I remember how much I cried when I lost that metallic Chinese pen that my father gifted. I was overjoyed when I got it back a few months later and am grateful to Rana for catching the thief. I still have the pen preserved

in my own little museum at home.

Nandy's dal (gang) in class one was so powerful that I had to lobby with the strong boys to escape his bullying. I had my own 'four cheers' group with Saikat, Tirthankar and Somnath to investigate 'mysteries' that were aplenty on our huge campus. I really feel ashamed quarrelling with Bansari da in the school bus and later bringing my mother to fight my battle.

We were in class one when something strange happened. A tall young man, probably in his early twenties, stepped into the class. And to our surprise, he started speaking in Bengali! He was full of humour and within no time the class was over. And we did not even realize that he had already had the first set of the Bengali alphabet ingrained in our memory.

Soumitra sir used to take Bengali in those early days of his career before switching over to Commerce. Be it Bengali or be it something as drab as Commerce, Soumitra sir had his own way of making the class lively. Whether it was chasing out Charles Bonny George, nick-named Chutki, when in class one, and carrying him back from the basket ball court or making Hati run all the way from the New Building to the gate and touch the darwan's feet as punishment for forgetting his book in class ten, we enjoyed every bit of it.

Today, the lines of Lichu Chor or Amader Choto Nadi immediately transport me to those summer evenings and I see myself mugging up the poems under the light of a hurricane lamp. Come what may, I did not feel like skipping Soumitra sir's homework.

Soumitra sir being a former student of the school himself could perhaps find that extra something when he faced the class. He taught till 2001 before settling down in New Zealand. It was a rather emotional moment when I went to meet him for the last time. He was teaching in the same room where he taught us for the last time, ten years back. He had not expected me to come and was therefore overwhelmed.

Mr. Smythe, our class teacher in the fourth grade, was another very interesting character. I remember the leather whip he called a 'generator'. In his words, 'it generates electricity when the switch is turned on'.

However, Mr. Smythe's classes were ones we always looked back on fondly. He used to tell stories of his army, navy and air force life before landing up in St. Mary's. Though I believed him, Jaideep and Hati were quick to pick up on this fine art of story telling. Watching 'Johnny Sokko and his flying robot', telecast every Monday, they too weaved stories of each having an army of robots at home. I felt rather primitive not having any!

The library period was something we all looked forward to every week. Since Miss D'Vas was in charge of the library as well, the periods were held in the second half after

her KGB was over. Open any old library book and you are sure to find the call number written in her extremely beautiful handwriting.

I had been warned not to mix with those alien creatures called boarders. I was told that boarders were naughty boys who did not study, who made mischief, who had the habit of robbing and clobbering innocent day scholars.

Boarders being teachers' pets, a day scholar could never hope for justice complaining. So I started out not liking the boarders. I did not like them as they were physically much stronger. I did not like them as they could communicate so well with the teachers. I did not like them as they were so particular, disciplined and uncomplaining and rebuked us for not being so. I did not like them as they always seemed to get away without punishment for alleged misbehaviour which we could not despise being such good boys.

Yet when I was suddenly taken ill in class, it was Vivian Cook who took me to the Sisters' room upstairs for medicine. And he took care of me throughout the day. I also remember crying and praying for Arthur McGilbert whose hands were badly bruised after a severe beating from a Brother.

Vacations for us meant merely a holiday. For those boarders who had a family it was a homecoming. How excited they were on the last day before each vacation! Their enthusiasm often made me want to accompany them to that interesting and rather adventurous place they called home. I remember the caterpillar that Dipshankar caught in the garden, days before the puja vacations in class three. I remember how he took the creature home in his pencil box. How impatient was I to see the cocoon after school reopened!

Well, the boarders are gone forever. St. Mary's after school hours is enclosed by an eerie silence. The dormitories become dark as soon as evening sets in. The beds of the Charlestons and the Bernards are empty. No one plays basket ball after school is over. The bell does not ring for games or for evening studies. That lovely smell no longer wafts from the kitchen near the New Building. Dust has gathered inside the servants' quarters. There is no one to offer prayers at night. 2004 marked the exodus, and many are perhaps still in search of their promised land.

Scaring us with a certain Brother Kyle was every teacher's last resort when we got out of control. Brother Kyle was a person we always kept a safe distance from. We heard stories of this extremely reserved and stout vice-principal of ours. Some said he was a fighter pilot in the Second World War. Others said he was a Fellow of the Royal Society. But we dared not clarify any of our doubts regarding the stories. In the assembly, he only said three words, 'Good Morning everybody' in that commanding voice. And that instantly sent shivers down our spine, teachers probably included!

Later, however, we came to know the real Brother Kyle from our seniors. And his former students still consider him one of the greatest influences in their lives. The Kyle in class was supposedly quite different to the Kyle we saw around the campus. He holds a unique record of not having a single failure among all his ICSE batches throughout his more-than-a-decade stay at St. Mary's. I wish I had Brother Kyle as my class teacher to weave the magic that could motivate people for a lifetime. However that was not to be as Kyle got transferred in 1989, months before we got to class nine. Well that remains my only regret in school.

This did not mean we had an uneventful high school. With Brother Billa (or 'Bela' as we used to call him) as the class teacher, it was sure to be fun. The aged Brother Billa was the teacher of many of our existing teachers including Soumitra sir and our then Principal Brother Sean Dias. And they would tell us often what a terror he used to be in his heydays. However, by the time he became our class teacher, in standards nine and ten, he had mellowed. His anger was a source of unadulterated entertainment for us. In fact, we enjoyed keeping a record of who topped the list of the "most punished". Increasing weight was given for a scolding or a bashing or a marching order. Indeed, it amused Brother Dias a great deal to see what we were putting his former teacher through. So we could easily get off the hook for troubling Billa. Be it mass abstinence from his class to play football or be it publicly eulogising and justifying Billa's imagined assassination with 'not that I loved Billa less but I loved his dog more', the matter was never escalated to the higher powers!

Those were our last days in school and nothing was as exciting. The fêtes, the inter-school quizzes, the inter-school tournaments et al were things we never missed. Some of us (like me) had the privilege of being in tuitions which were graced by girls. I used to attend three tuitions starting from 7 in the morning on Saturdays and never woke up late or complained!

It was a long time before we truly realized that school had ended. The eleven-year sojourn was enough to make most classmates members of a family. Making life hell for Br. Billa is one topic that none of us tire of discussing even to this day - especially his reaction to Arijit breaking a fan blade in the classroom with a football or Rajat and Satyajit going home when asked to leave the class to gain bonus points in the punishment register.

Though it has been more than a decade since I left school, I have never stopped visiting my childhood. Every time I step into the school compound, I am startled by the same scent of grass, the same gentle breeze blowing across those shady trees, the same melody in those birds' songs. It replenishes me and sustains me. In my book of laughter and forgetting, St Mary's will always be my one true remembrance.