

Echoes from Sainik School

A Memoir of Brotherhood and Growing Up

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IN GRATITUDE



To the revered teachers of Sainik School, to my seniors and cherished friends, whose guidance, discipline, and affection shaped the very foundation of my childhood.



Even today, their faces, their smiles, and their familiar call remain engraved upon the canvas of memory.



This book is dedicated to them as a humble expression of my deepest gratitude.



Why These Writings?

To be honest, these pieces were never written with a plan in mind, nor did I begin them intending to publish a book. Why These Writings? Book. At different moments in life, when old memories unexpectedly knocked at the doors of my mind, I simply expressed those feelings spontaneously through writing. After writing them, I would post them in our Sainik School '72 batch group. To my surprise, most of my friends would grow deeply nostalgic and urge me to write more.

In truth, memory is somewhat like indigestion. And when one suffers from indigestion, a belch is inevitable. From time to time, such “belches” of memory surfaced, and I merely gave them the form of words.

I remember very clearly how these writings began. In 2010, after admitting my daughter to an engineering college and leaving her in the hostel for the first time, I was on my way back home. Suddenly, I noticed the date—26th July. On that very same day in 1972, at the age of ten, I, too, had been left at the Sainik School hostel. And by a strange coincidence, many years later, I had left my own daughter in a hostel on the same date.

At that moment, the memory of my own first day at school rose vividly before my eyes. That was how the writing began.

The word *nostalgia*—the act of looking back—reminds us of an old saying: *memories are always sweet*. But are memories always sweet?

Nostalgia is the emotional tide that carries us back to the past. It is a feeling that makes us believe that the days gone by were somehow better than the present. In reality, however, nostalgia is a kind of mental illusion—one that persuades us that everything used to be more beautiful before.

When we recall the past, we tend to remember the pleasant moments more vividly while quietly forgetting the unpleasant ones. It is not always a faithful recollection of events; rather, it stands upon a handful of cherished memories carefully preserved by the mind.

Do you remember Jagjit Singh's famous song—

“Woh kagaz ki kashti, woh baarish ka paani”?

That song captures the very same sentiment.

Human beings often imagine a version of the past in which they themselves were innocent, carefree, and secure—though in reality, such a picture rarely reflects the truth. When people think of their school or college days, they remember the laughter, the friendships, and the carefree wanderings. What they forget are the exam pressures, the financial worries, and the stern teachers who once seemed so intimidating.

By remembering only the brighter side of things, we make the past appear far more beautiful than it really was. The truth is—nostalgia is, in many ways, an emotional deception.

Even if objects or places from the past are brought back, the joy of those earlier days rarely returns. Something similar happened in 2012 when, after forty years, we returned to our school for a reunion. I found that the memories of the past did not quite align with what stood before my eyes. We ourselves had grown older, our perspectives had changed, and the

image of the school preserved in our minds no longer matched reality.

That tall water tank of the school no longer seemed quite so tall. In truth, it was we who had grown taller.

Why This Book?

Many people have played a role in bringing these writings out of their cradle and into the form of a book. At every stage, my school classmates helped me greatly—encouraging me and correcting various errors along the way.

First and foremost, our friend Kajal helped me throughout—from beginning to end—with his candid opinions expressed in his own distinctive style. Alok, Debashish Das from Canada, Shankar Routh, and Apurba helped to correct several mistakes and also assisted in verifying dates and timelines.

Shantanu, Milan, Abhijit, Samir Maity, Saroj Kundu, Soumitra Neyogi, Debashish Dutta, Daljit, and many others encouraged me in different ways at different times. I remain deeply grateful to all of them.

Sukanta, Gautam Mondal, Shouvik, Partha Banerjee, Tapan Patra, Gour Gopal, Debashish Bhowmik, Sisir Baidya, Samir Das, Ratan, Arindam, Arnab, Abhay, Sanjay, and also the wives of many friends—Mousumi, Suparna, Chitra, Rama, Mouri, Sarita, Ratna, Sushmita, Sujata, Rupa, and several others—read these writings and encouraged me generously. I sincerely thank them all.

All the black-and-white illustrations in this book have been drawn by my Sainik School friend Atanu Chatterjee. Atanu readily agreed to do the drawings without accepting any payment. I have disturbed him on several occasions, but he has

been so cooperative and has done his best within a short time. My heartfelt thanks go to him.

The cover of this book has been designed by our batchmate, Sukanta Dasgupta. He had also designed the cover of my third book without any remuneration. Naturally, this time too, I requested him to create the cover. As always, Sukanta executed the work beautifully. A mere formal “thank you” would hardly do justice to his contribution.

At the final stage, Ashokda and our friend Alope connected us with Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha, a distinguished alumnus of our Sainik School. He graciously agreed to write the invaluable foreword for this book. For that, I offer him my deepest gratitude.

I would also like to mention here that whatever royalty is earned from selling this book will be donated generously to the Sainik School Purulia Welfare Fund, my alma mater, as a mark of gratitude.

Yet in the end, I would still say – *memories are always sweet*. Our beloved alma mater will forever remain preserved in the deepest corner of my heart. From afar, I shall bow to it every day in silent reverence.

“O incomparable, magnificent One,

What I gave you was your own gift;

By accepting it, you have made me more indebted.

Farewell, my friend.”

Preface



As I turned back the pages of memory, it felt as though the days of my youth had come alive once again. The stories of the daily rhythms of Sainik School Purulia, the shared joys and struggles of our boyhood—this book is not merely a collection of personal reminiscences. It is an echo of a time. Through his pen, the author has held up those days—their colours, their fatigue, their laughter, and their meaning—that have left an indelible imprint on all our lives.

As I turned each page, it seemed as though I had returned once more to the parade ground of that red-soiled campus, to the sound of the siren, the sharp call of NCC boots, the stern discipline of the Dining Hall, and the easy laughter of Saturday evenings. In narrating his own experiences, the author allows us—countless former cadets of Purulia—to rediscover fragments of ourselves within every description.

The greatest strength of this book lies in its simplicity and sincerity. There is no unnecessary ornamentation, no excessive embellishment. Just as memories drift through our minds—sometimes gently, sometimes sharply, at times sweet and at times touched with sorrow—so too have these recollections been written with honest emotion. Thus, the book belongs not to one author alone; it becomes a shared voice of all of us.

For today's reader—whether a former cadet or someone looking back from outside these pages—the memories within this book will become a unique journey. The discipline and camaraderie that shaped those formative years, the foundations they built for life ahead, and the treasure of those days remain priceless even today.

I feel proud and grateful that these memories have been preserved in writing. They are not merely the story of one former student; they are the story of all of us. In a larger sense, they are also the story of a generation that grew up during a changing time in India. I believe these recollections will make readers smile, move them deeply, and perhaps even bring a quiet tear to the corner of the eye.

With deep affection and pride,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Arup Raha', with a stylized, flowing script.

Chief of Air Staff Arup Raha

PVSM, AVSM, VM, ADC, and a former student of Sainik School Purulia.

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Entry to Purulia

I had no idea when I had dozed off. I opened my eyes to find our train pulling into a station. Through the window, I spotted a yellow board with bold Bengali letters — *Purulia*. Even before I could glance at my mother, I saw our luggage neatly packed. We were preparing to get down.

It had taken four different trains to reach Purulia from *Rampurhat* that day. My mother and uncle were with me. I never knew my father. He passed away before I turned one. These are things I've only heard; I have no memories of him. I don't even recall his face. For me, since childhood, my father existed only in a photograph.



Which is why, for all practical purposes, my guardian was just one person — my mother. In today's terms, she was a "single parent." But of course, such a long journey needed a man's support, so my maternal uncle accompanied us.

The journey had been tiring, and on top of that, the soot from the coal engine blew in relentlessly through the windows, smearing my face darker than it already was. Perhaps the sadness of leaving home showed on my face, too. Still, I didn't let the discomfort show, for a quiet excitement and curiosity stirred within me.

They had told me I was being sent to a boarding school. It was the year 1972. I was ten years old then, just promoted to class five in a small-town school. I had always been good at studies and was considered a "good boy" in school. But it was difficult for my widowed mother to raise two sons on her own. Around this time, she came across an advertisement in a Bengali newspaper inviting applications for admission to the Sainik School.

We filled out the form, practised maths problems at home, and travelled to Purulia for the entrance exam. The exam was conducted in Bengali, which made things easier. The first paper had 100 arithmetic problems — addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division — all to be done in fifteen minutes. I think I managed to solve ninety-eight. The second paper had twenty-five longer sums. The third was Bengali comprehension. I quite enjoyed it and did well. But the last paper was an "Intelligence test," something I had never encountered before. I wrote what I could, without truly understanding it.

At home, I'd only been told that I would be sent to a boarding school — a place far from home, with strict rules, and regular meals of pumpkin curry and rice-dal. From overheard conversations, I'd gathered that it was a kind of military school. But I had no clear idea what that meant.

“Come on, pick up your bag quickly,” my mother called. I hurried behind her and stepped off the train onto the platform, which was laid with red gravel and sat quite low from the train. I had to jump down. Wide-eyed and curious, I stepped out of the station and looked around. With all our luggage, we hired a porter to carry it to the rickshaw stand.

Ah! The rickshaws there looked quite odd — smaller, with a luggage space at the back. The three of us squeezed into one with all our bags and reached a hotel as evening descended. The signboard read *Bengal Boarding*, and I thought this must be the hostel I’d be staying in. But I soon realised this was just a hotel for the night. The real boarding school awaited the next morning. Coincidentally, the hotel’s name was *Bengal Boarding*. It was a modest, budget place. We entered through a narrow lane and reached a table manned by a pot-bellied man in a checkered lungi — the manager. After dinner, I don’t remember when I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, we set out for the school hostel with all my belongings. I had a black trunk with my name painted in white and beneath it, “Sainik School Purulia.” The school was about 5–6 kilometres outside town. The rickshaw ride to the school that day wasn’t unpleasant.

It was 26th July 1972. I don’t remember the day of the week. Maybe Wednesday. As we rode along the road, I saw it — a gleaming school building amid open fields. The further we went, the clearer it became. What a grand structure! I was awestruck. We entered a large hall where many boys were sitting with their parents. I later learnt it was the Assembly Hall.

All the boys were around my age, so it didn’t take long for us to start chatting. One by one, our names were called, and we

were handed admission papers. I was allotted a roll number and a hostel house — *Tagore House, Roll Number 640*. Such a large number! Back home, roll numbers were based on exam rank. Here, I would later learn, roll numbers were given in order of admission and stayed with you for your entire school life. Even the hostel (called “House” here, not “hostel” or “boarding”) would never change.

Immediately, our clothes were marked with a matchstick dipped in marking ink — 640/Tg. By then, I had found some companions, mostly boys from Kolkata. Only one other boy, like me, was from Murshidabad.

I felt a thrill — the trunk, the hold-all, the labels — all mine. I felt independent, free from the commands and control of home.

But my illusion shattered the very next day. Everything here followed orders — discipline, rules, and routine.

By 1:30 pm, someone came and told us, the new boys, to head to the dining hall for lunch. We followed a senior student. I was very hungry. The hall was huge, with tables neatly arranged and chairs tucked in. Six boys per table. But no one was sitting — all were standing behind their chairs. Our guide told us to wait for the school captain’s command before sitting.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of a spoon tapping a glass. Silence. Then the school captain spoke loudly in English, and we all pulled out our chairs and sat down. Only years later did I understand the words he’d said in the beginning: “*Let us be thankful for what we are going to receive.*” At the end of the meal, he would say: “*Let us be thankful for what we have received.*”

We were to eat with a spoon and a fork. No eating with hands allowed! I was shocked. Forks and spoons were for fancy

dinners or in restaurants. Our senior told us we could use our hands that day, but from tomorrow, it would be cutlery only.

After lunch, the senior boy took me to the quartermaster's office. I was handed khaki shirts, trousers, bed sheets, blankets, and all sorts of unfamiliar items — each marked with my roll number and house. I was taught what to use and when to use. From that day onward, I would be responsible for my own belongings. If anything was damaged or outgrown, I'd have to return it as "condemned" to get a replacement.

That senior boy — a tall, slim eighth grader named Partha — felt like an angel to me that day.

By the time we were done collecting things, evening had fallen. I saw my mother and uncle standing nearby. Partha-da said, "Go touch their feet and say goodbye. You won't meet them again for a while. You'll be on your own now."

My heart softened at once. A lump rose in my throat, and my eyes blurred. I saw my mother wipe her tears with the edge of her sari. I bowed to both of them and didn't look back. I walked straight toward Tagore House. Partha-da kept talking beside me, "I cried too when my parents left me here for the first time..."

On the way, he explained the daily routine — like a true mentor.

I was assigned Room number 9 in Tagore House, with nine other boys. The room had five beds on both side, wardrobes attached to the walls, hangers, shoe space, and an open shelf for small items. I slid my black trunk under the bed and locked it with a pressure lock. This lock was such that if you locked it with the key still inside, there would be no way to open it again except to break the lock.

That evening, the housemaster came and explained that we had to wear sleeping suits, fix our mosquito nets properly, and be in bed by 10 pm so we could wake up at 5:30 when the siren went off for P.T.

After dinner, we returned to our rooms — all of us with sullen faces. It was the first time we'd be sleeping alone, away from home. But the mood soon lightened. We all changed into our oversized, floppy sleeping suits and burst into laughter at the sight of each other.

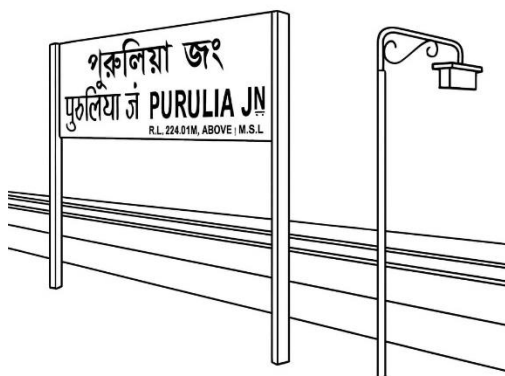
One boy named Bikash, from a village in Purulia, broke into a local folk song: "*Tahuk Tahuk lagise...*"

We chatted from inside our mosquito nets and eventually drifted off. I don't remember who turned the lights off.

I was jolted awake the next morning by the boys shouting and a loud siren. It was time to get up and go for PT. I washed my face and changed into white shorts, a white vest, socks, and canvas shoes for P.T.

I asked, confused, "What's P.T.?"

"P.T. means Physical Training," someone replied. "Exercise."



The First Day at School

After breakfast on the first day, we were taken to the school grounds. There, everyone lined up by class in a long, open area flanked by classroom buildings on both sides. One end opened out towards the road — the very path we had marched down. On the opposite end was the corridor of the main school building, and in front of it stood a raised platform with a long desk. I would later learn this was called a *podium*, the spot from where speeches were delivered.

The whole proceeding was being conducted by the school captain—a rather stern-looking figure with a rugged, almost mountainous face and physique. Soon, three men in khaki uniforms arrived and stood opposite the students. One was the headmaster, the second the registrar, and the third—by far the shortest—was the principal. I would come to know their identities later. All of them were Air Force officers. The headmaster and the registrar held the rank of Squadron Leader, while the principal was a Wing Commander.

The principal stood behind the tall podium and began speaking in English at length. I didn't understand a word of it, but his body language made it very clear that he was irritated and visibly angry. The podium was so tall that only the top of his head was visible to us. From a distance, all we could do was watch his animated expressions without grasping

anything he said. After about fifteen minutes, the session ended with the national anthem.

Curious, I asked the boy standing next to me what the principal had said. He replied, "Doesn't matter. Sir was furious and was basically scolding everyone." After that, everyone dispersed to their respective classrooms.

That day, I was assigned to Class 5 'A'. We didn't study much—most of the time was spent getting to know one another. Our class teacher, Mr B.K. Bose Sir introduced himself. He must have been in his forties—fair-complexioned, clean-shaven, always smiling gently. He wore white trousers and an untucked half-sleeve white shirt. A peculiar habit of his was to say "Followed" after almost every English sentence. It seemed to be his trademark.

That day, he asked each of us our names, what our fathers did, and then—quite playfully—gave each of us a nickname. Those nicknames stuck. Even fifty years later, many of us are still known by those names among friends. It felt like an imprint on our identity—something akin to "imprinting during the critical stage of development!"

We had a peculiar problem in class—five students were named *Debashish*. Each had a different surname, but two of them even shared the same surname and were in the same House! Luckily, one was jet-black in complexion and the other, extremely fair. So Mr Bose cleverly dubbed one "*Black Debashish*" and the other "*White Debashish*." Everyone found it amusing and accepted it without complaint. Problem solved.

Another *Debashish Bhattacharya* was nicknamed "*Bamun Bhattro*" (a Brahmin scribe). One became "*Bhow*," short for Bhowmick. Another, tall and skinny like a dry stick, was called

“Kashto,” reminiscent of Kalidasa’s verse – *“Shushkam Kashtam Tishthate Agre”* (a dry log stands ahead).

Mr Bose taught us English. Math was taught by Mr S.S. Ghosh, who must have been around sixty at the time. Despite his age, he walked in a brisk, military-style left-right march. But his stiff, inflexible movements betrayed what I now understand may have been ankylosis of the joints.

Mr Ghosh spoke only in English and taught mathematics in Class 5. Initially, when he began with LCM and HCF, I was completely lost. Before joining this school, I took pride in my math skills. But here, I felt like a fool. Only when I realised that LCM and HCF were the same as the Bengali terms *Losagu* and *Gosagu*, did it start to make sense again.

For the first few days, I was happy to be in Section A – many of my newly acquainted dormitory mates were there, and I felt at ease. But one day, Mr Bose announced, “Today, we will have a dictation in English. Based on the results, you’ll be reassigned to sections. Those scoring higher will stay in Section A, and the rest will move to Section B.” I was stunned. Dictation? *“Shrutilekha,”* (in Bengali), he explained – it meant writing the spellings of words as spoken in English.

The dictation began. Word after word was pronounced, and students wrote them down swiftly. A Hindi-speaking friend sitting beside me finished quickly. As for me, I didn’t even recognise most of the words, let alone their spellings. I felt helpless and exposed.

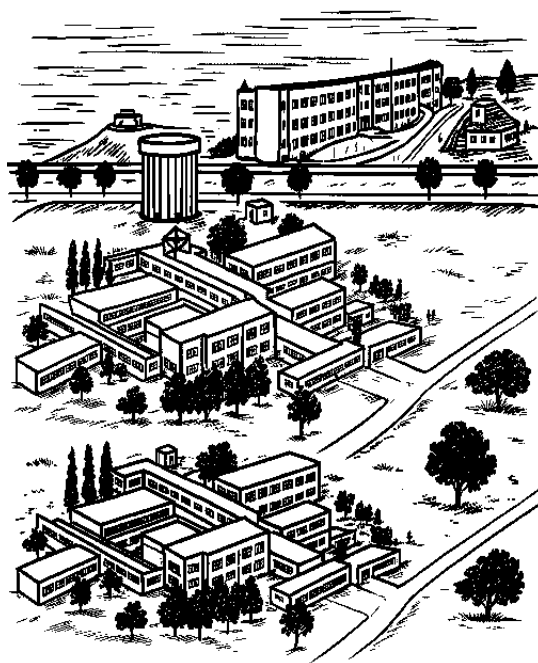
When the results came out, I had scored very low and was promptly moved to Section B. It upset me deeply. I had never sat in a ‘B’ section before. From the next day, I had to leave my familiar friends and settle into a new class.

Everything here was in English. We had to speak in English from morning to night—if possible, even dream in English! I hadn't known before enrolling that this was an English-medium school. It became clear that if I wanted to survive here, I had to learn English properly. One of our dorm mates began learning English seriously—translating from Hindi, memorising grammar books, and practising every day.

Gradually, I too began to like the school. Slowly but surely, I started forming sentences in broken English. I could understand the school captain's orders, though the long morning assembly speeches still flew right over my head.

And then there was something called “ragging.” What was that? It was the senior boys getting to know the newcomers—a sort of initiation. Sometimes it meant a friendly slap or a playful shove. But no complaints could be made to the authorities. Seniors were to be respected as elder brothers—*Dada*. Whatever they said, we had to obey—even take orders. In this system, the seniors were your guardians—your *mai-baap*.





"Attention – Stand at Ease – Tej Chal!"

From the very next day after joining Sainik School, we were thrown straight into the world of parades. And we continued doing it for the next eight years! Repeating the same routine day after day turned the whole thing mechanical – discipline, parades, drills – we all became habituated to those routine activities.

After breakfast each morning, we'd line up house-wise and march to our classroom premises. Then, for morning assembly, we would again fall in line by class, march once more, and enter the classroom. After school, we'd march our way to the dining hall for lunch.

Even in the evening, we had to parade our way to the games field. After returning, we'd bathe quickly and again march to the prep classes. Can you believe it? Even at night, with our stomachs growling from hunger, we had to line up and *march* to the dining hall after prep!

Back in 1972, when I entered Class 5, I had no clue what a "parade" even meant. Every day we were trained step by step. Some overenthusiastic seniors would even practice their newly learned moves in the hostel during free time.

That's when we first learned: if your right leg goes forward, your left hand swings forward — and vice versa. This, apparently, is the golden rule of "Tej Chal" (marching drill).

To turn back, one had to command: "*Peechhe Mur!*" And even that had a formula — "T, L, V, H"! Slowly, we picked up commands like "*Daine Mur, Baaye Mur, Daine Dekh...*" and so on.

Oh, the joy of learning it all! At last, we wouldn't be punished for getting it wrong!



On Mondays during the first two periods and again on Friday evenings, we had the real-deal parade sessions — NCC drills. No evening games on Fridays. We had to wear perfectly ironed khaki uniforms, polished heavy NCC shoes, and caps. Those shoes always reminded me of a bulldog's face — and they had thin metal horseshoes nailed beneath them that made a sharp "*thak-thak*" sound with every step.

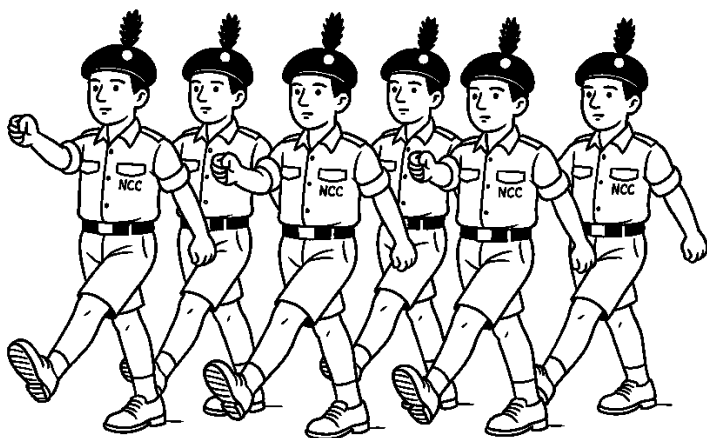
Remember Gabbar Singh from the film *Sholay*? The way he paced on stone floors with his belt in hand, uttering the iconic line "*Kitne aadmi the?*" — the sound of his boots hitting the floor? Exactly like that! That's how our NCC boots sounded.

The moment we heard that sound echoing down the corridor, we juniors knew something serious was about to happen — especially if it was coming from a senior or school prefect.

Now, about the NCC belt — it was special. It wrapped over the waist and buckled tightly at the front with two brass hooks. The belt was made of stiff, canvas-like, rough cloth. The cap was navy blue or black, with a red feather-like ornament on top, called a “hackle,” or sometimes a “pom-pom” made of red wool. It looked like a table tennis ball. If you didn’t fix it tightly, it would droop to one side and look downright silly.

During NCC sessions, we had an NCC teacher, and an army Subedar was in charge. NCC days were usually quite tough. Sometimes, when they said “*Baith jao*”, we had to sit in Padmasana (cross-legged) perfectly still until the Subedar saab said “*Aaram se*” — meaning we could finally relax a little.

Then came the long lectures in Hindi, of course, by the Subedar saab.



Sometimes during NCC drills, they would take us outside the school campus — far away. Oh, what fun that was! The excitement of stepping out of the campus boundaries, even if just for a while. That fresh outside air — plus sneaking a snack during breaks. For seniors, it was an opportunity to smuggle in cigarettes!

After all the marching, sweating, and shouting, we'd finally get a treat — a little packet containing a samosa, a jilipi (jalebi), and a glass of sharbat. That felt like pure nectar to us!

And we'd ask one another:

"When is the next NCC parade?"

PT and Dining

Every morning began with standing in line for an hour of PT, dressed in white half-pants and a sleeveless vest. We had to jog quite a distance before starting exercise routines, which involved various movements of arms and legs for nearly an hour. These sessions were supervised by our School Captain, House

Captains, and two PT teachers. One of the PT teachers was a Sikh gentleman – Mr. G.B. Singh – well-built, dressed in white shorts and a T-shirt, always on his toes, tirelessly dedicated to overseeing us. Later we found out that his son had joined our class. Since he was a teacher's son, he stayed at home and was called a "*day Scholar*." But he too followed the same regimented routine as we did.

The other PT teacher, tall and usually dressed in full pants, would mostly stand in one spot, rarely participating in the exercises. But his vigilant eyes missed nothing. His voice was deep and booming – so much so that a single roar could make everyone tremble. Whatever his real name was, we secretly gave him a different nickname.

Back then, waking up early every day for PT was not something we enjoyed. But we had no choice – we had to go. Attendance was mandatory at roll call. Our PT dress had to be neat. Our white canvas shoes had to be scrubbed and

whitened. The discipline was so strict that there was absolutely no scope for error.

Sundays were a relief — no PT, so we could sleep in. On other days, if it rained in the morning, we were somewhat spared — less running around. So, every cloudy morning, we'd secretly pray for a downpour, just to avoid PT. But those artificial prayers rarely found favour with the heavens.

After PT, we'd rush back, change into our khaki uniform, polish our black shoes to a shine, strap on a red leather belt with a brass buckle engraved with the school emblem, and get ready for breakfast. We had to reach the dining hall in time. After breakfast, roll call again according to houses, and then march to the assembly hall.

I still remember my first breakfast at the dining hall. We entered and stood at our designated spots. The dining hall was a huge, long space. Each of the four houses had its own row of dining tables, and an additional row served as a common or extra row. Each row had thirteen tables, and in each table seated six. No one was allowed to sit until the School Captain gave the command.

Uniformed waiters moved around the tables. They served everything. Breakfast typically included six pieces of bread, a spoonful of butter, one boiled egg, and a cup of tea — all neatly placed on a quarter plate (chinaware), along with a spoon and a butter knife. To us, it looked like English-style eating. The idea of using cutlery felt strange — almost alien. Initially, I struggled to eat using a fork and spoon — sometimes the food would fall, sometimes the cutlery itself! How on earth was one supposed to eat a boiled egg with a spoon? We were hungry, nervous, and awkwardly sweating. I was shy by nature, and

the strict environment made me even more timid. I couldn't express myself, nor could I eat properly.

At the dining tables, some teachers also sat and ate. Senior and junior students sat together at fixed seats that never changed. Seniors would usually teach us table manners. Gradually, I got used to eating with a fork and spoon.

Our seniors were very much the "big brothers." Even a slight seniority gave them the license to boss us around. One was expected to eat silently—no talking at the table. On one side, we had the fear of seniors, and on the other, the terror of dropping the fork. Truly, a case of "caught between the crocodile in the water and the tiger on land."

Breakfast wasn't too bad, though. Lunch was served around 1:30 PM. After attending classes from morning until then, tired students would march to the dining hall, chanting "left-right" in unison.

Upon entering, we stood behind our chairs—tucked under the table—until the School Captain gave the command to sit. If you were late and hadn't reached your table yet, and the captain had already tapped his spoon on the table with a sound, "thak, thak, thak...", you had to freeze like a statue and wait till the word "Pledge" was uttered. No one dared to speak before that. If there was even a whisper, the captain would shout, "Don't talk! Stop talking!" Only after the "Pledge" could everyone pull out their chairs with a collective "dhop, dhop, dhop..." sound followed by the soft clinking of cutlery. Silence was mandatory. No loud burping, no dragging chairs, no scraping plates. If you needed something, you had to politely say, "Can you please pass me the rice?" Such was the code of table manners.

Lunch usually consisted of two handmade chapatis (yes, we learnt here that they're called 'chapatis', not 'rotis'), two bowlfuls of rice (served in a standardized steel bowl), one seasonal vegetarian curry, and a bowl of fish curry with a single piece of fish and potato-free gravy – usually *rui* or *Katla*. We were given about thirty minutes to eat. After the School Captain's final "Pledge", we would all stand, push our chairs neatly under the table, which created a unified screeching sound, and head off to our rooms after washing our hands.



Dinner followed the same routine. It was here that I first learned that “night’s meal” is called “*dinner*”. The menu: the same chapatis, rice, dal, two types of curry, and a small plate of dessert—typically custard, semolina kheer, or dry *bundi*. This was called the “sweet dish” or “dessert”. A fitting end to the meal – “*Madhurena Samapayet*” (let the end be sweet). No matter how the rest of dinner was, everyone looked forward to the sweet dish. Among all, the dry *bundi* served on Thursday dinners were the most coveted. But the portion was

too small — never enough. I'd often thought when I went home during vacations, I'll eat *bundi* to my heart's content. I don't remember if I ever did, but the craving for that *bundi* has stayed with me ever since.

The School Campus

Our Sainik School campus was vast—spanning nearly 314 acres. It was surrounded by barbed-wire fencing, though, from our hostel, the boundary was so distant that it wasn't even visible. The main entrance of the school opened right onto the Ranchi Road. Bold letters on the gate read: "Sainik School Purulia." The large gate mostly remained shut, with a smaller side gate used for entry and exit. Students were strictly forbidden from stepping outside the gates. Adjacent to the gate was a small guard room, where a uniformed guard was stationed at all times. Inside was a switch that controlled the siren. The siren would go off several times a day, regulating our entire routine with precision.

From the gate, two parallel tar roads stretched all the way to the far end of the school. Between them ran a line of neatly bordered bougainvillea bushes, enclosed in red-brick beds with white-painted edges. On either side of the roads ran long drainage channels.

To the right, just after entering, was a large open area where a ten-foot-high wall was later constructed for obstacle training. A little further, a large pond nestled amidst tall trees, followed by a vast, open field that extended to the horizon. Beyond this, another road branched off to the right, leading to the quarters of the Headmaster, the Registrar, and a little further ahead, the Assistant Headmaster. Opposite these lay the back door of the

dining hall—used only for transporting provisions and supplies, off-limits to us.

That road further led to our four hostels—each three-storeyed. Every floor had three large dormitory-style rooms. The hostels were named Patel, Tagore, Tilak, and Chittaranjan Houses. Right in front of Tagore House stood the large, single-storied dining hall. This area in front of the hostels remained etched in memory—it was the backdrop of most of our joys and sorrows.

Behind the Tagore and Patel hostels stood a fenced water-pump area—our saviour in summers. When the hostel water ran out, this pump would be turned on in the afternoons for bathing. Otherwise, it remained idle.

Past the pump area, the land dipped into the rough, grassless hockey field. Falling during play meant a guaranteed bruise..

Beyond the hockey field were the teachers' quarters—some single-storeyed and others rising to three floors, all laid out in two rows.

Further down stood a few smaller staff quarters—one of which housed *Gopalda*, a member of our hospital staff.

Then came the washermen's quarters—two three-storied blocks. Opposite them stood another staff block. Past these, an open field marked the boundary edge.

On entering from the main gate, the left-hand side began with a patch of wild greenery. A road veered off towards the principal's bungalow—a grand structure surrounded by mango and guava trees. Of course, this area was off-limits to us. But forbidden zones often beckon more. The lure of ripe mangoes and guavas made it impossible to resist—especially

in summer. We would often sneak in during afternoons or at night to grab a few. One mango tree bore especially sweet-sour fruits—a well-guarded secret among those who knew.

The next road on the left led to the main school building—the "Administrative Building." A little ahead, another path ran behind the Assembly Hall—the one we marched through every afternoon to reach the dining hall.

Beyond this, the left side of the road opened into the back of the milk-break area—a shortcut from school to the hostel. Right there stood the towering water tank, an imposing structure that made us crane our necks in childhood wonder. The spiral staircase remained locked; it was only opened for maintenance. Once, finding the gate ajar, I climbed all the way up—over a hundred steps! It was dusty and soiled, likely by birds, but the view from the top was breathtaking. The entire campus stretched out below like a map—as if viewed from an airplane. It was both thrilling and spine-tingling.

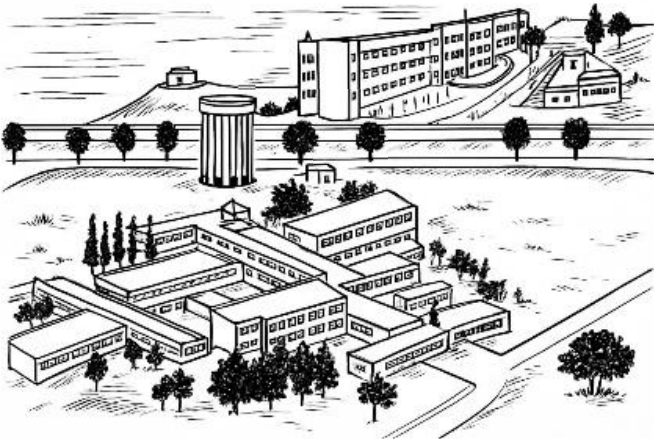


Past the tank lay the basketball court, volleyball area, and the boxing ring. Turning left from there led to the games store and

the Quartermaster's store. A bit ahead to the right, a row of single-storied staff quarters housed our mess manager, PT instructor, school bus driver, and the quartermaster.

To the left of the road, eucalyptus trees stood tall and straight. Right beside them was our small hospital. A large open area spread in front, leading to the quadrangular field. This field never grew grass—always dry and rough. All our major programs took place here—Independence Day, Republic Day parades, sports meet, NCC activities, and more. To the left of this field, the land sloped steeply into another unused ground that extended right up to the barbed-wire boundary.

A little further along the main road, past the quadrangle, lay a wild area with uneven land and unknown species of tall trees—called the "Mangrove." This spot came alive during Holi (*Fagua*), when we gathered for celebration. Further on was a football field, followed by the earlier-mentioned staff quarters.



The main road curved into a roundabout after the washermen's quarters. To the left lay field after field, while the right held little of note. Beyond the fields stood a small Shiva

temple near the boundary. Past the temple lay a vast pond with no embankment. Lotus flowers bloomed there year-round—hence we fondly called it the "Lotus Pond." It was a quiet, romantic place. During adolescence, it was where we'd go to reflect and find solitude. But once dusk fell, the place took on a haunted air—no one dared to venture near at night.

Beyond the pond, a field led to the rear boundary—past which the village began. We were forbidden to go there. But did that stop us? Well... that's a story for another time.

The School Hospital

Our school hospital was nestled between Patel House and the main playground, a little to the north. A neat stone-chip path led to it, lined on both sides by rows of eucalyptus trees. Beside the path ran a line of neatly bordered bougainvillea bushes, enclosed in red-brick beds with white-painted edges.

A few steps ahead took us into the main hospital building. To the right of the entrance was the **MI Room** — our “outdoor”. It was a large hall where a part-time doctor sat at a desk three days a week, from 2:30 PM to 4 PM. Outside the room, students queued up with handwritten slips to show their ailments. Inside, our pharmacist, Mr Biswas, would nervously sweat and shuffle back and forth. The doctor didn't trust him much, nor did we.

For every little thing, the doctor would yell, “Gopal!” — summoning Gopal-da, the actual go-to guy. The doctor would sit with a big, thick register and jot down our ailments, then scribble medicines onto our slips.

Medicines in those days? Ah — the golden age of *Penicillin*, *Sulfadiazine*, and *Enteroquinol*. For any ailment, these medicines were served, so we joked in Bengali, “*Thor bori khara, khara bori thor!*” that is “Six of one, half a dozen of the other” or “It's all the same” in English.

If you had a cut or wound, Gopal-da would dress it. If you broke a bone, the doctor would plaster it right there. A sprain? Out came the crêpe bandage!

Now, some of us had more "creative" intentions — we'd fake illness just to either get admitted to the hospital or at least snag an "EP Slip". That slip meant 'Excuse PT', freedom from PT and parade for a few blissful days.

And if you managed to get a crêpe bandage on your hand — jackpot! No classwork for weeks. Our classmate Gour Gopal, in fact, seemed to have a permanent bandage on his hand!

Inside the room was also a weighing machine and a height scale. Every few months, we'd be called for routine medical check-ups. They'd record our height, weight, and chest measurements.

Conjunctivitis was popularly known as "*Joy Bangla*" back then. Red, itchy eyes were a common sight. If you had it, the doctor would sometimes let you wear dark sunglasses for a few days.

I remember after summer holidays, Partha from Tagore House returned to school wearing dark glasses. Claimed his eyes were infected. Days passed, and he continued wearing them — but he mostly used them to nap during class! Sitting upright, he'd doze off comfortably behind those shades. And after discovering this brilliant life-hack, he never wanted to take them off!

Opposite the MI Room was an open space with a raised, black-slabbed room used for dressings and plastering. Attached to it was a toilet.

Beside that was a long corridor that led into a spacious indoor ward — a large hall with beds on both sides, maybe 12 to 14 in total. The first room along the corridor was the pantry.

Now, enter the hospital, and to your right was the doctor's OPD. Straight ahead lay another corridor with four small rooms. The first three were isolation rooms — used during outbreaks of measles, chickenpox, or mumps. Most of the time, they remained locked.

The last room belonged to the pharmacist, who stayed there alone and ate in our dining hall. This part of the hospital was quiet and a bit creepy. Past the four-foot wall outside his room lay a thicket of wild trees. Naturally, we didn't venture there often.

The doctor came only three days a week, in a cream-coloured Ambassador, right around 2:30 PM. His name, if I recall correctly, was Dr Sukumar Roy — a portly gentleman who looked every bit like a proper doctor. Just spotting his car from a distance after lunch was enough to know: "Doctor is in today!"

The rest of the time, it was just Gopal-da and the pharmacist running the show. But emergencies at night? Of course, those happened. The school bus would then ferry students to the Purulia District Hospital. For blood tests, X-rays, or complicated cases, the same journey happened during the day.

And yes — going to town meant freedom! Also, an opportunity to sneak in snacks. Seniors even managed to smuggle in small "treats".

The doctor often prescribed a tonic called '*Mynberrys compound*' — it looked and tasted like dark jaggery syrup. If anyone brought it, everyone took turns sipping until the bottle

was finished in a day. Cough syrups like *Waterberry's Compound* and *Benadryl* were actually tasty, though they made you drowsy.

Here's the funny part — if the doctor diagnosed you with *malnutrition*, you got extra food in the dining hall! Like a bonus boiled egg daily. We'd secretly wish, "*Dear God, please let me be malnourished this term!*"

Alas, I was never so lucky. Back then, we'd dream of getting an extra egg. But today, our kids turn their nose up at it!

Most of us didn't like being admitted to the hospital. It meant isolation — senior or junior, you were stuck alone. But the food wasn't bad. Mess staffer *Hemu* would walk rhythmically carrying your food tray from the mess, before the meal bell even rang.



Once, in Class XI or XII, two of us faked a major illness just to get admitted. That evening, we hung mosquito nets over our beds, then in the evening slipped out to the town to watch a movie. Came back at night, tiptoed past the corridor, opened the door, and quietly crawled back into bed. The pharmacist

didn't notice a thing. After all, there was no roll-call in the hospital!

Today, I'm a Professor and Head of a ward at a medical college, managing over 50 indoor beds under my care. I'm known as a strict, no-nonsense teacher.

And yet, sometimes I smile to myself, thinking — Good thing no one here knows about my mischievous school hospital adventures!

Punishment: A Strange Delight

*"I kindle a lamp from all my grief,
And let it burn across the day;
In its flame, my sorrows shine –
Transformed into a silent prayer."*

– Rabindranath Tagore

How many types of punishment exist? There's no definite answer to that. Punishments surely come in many forms – but counting them is nearly impossible.

When I first joined Sainik School, I came across a whole new world of strange words and phrases I had never heard before. After all, I was just ten years old – wearing half-pants and barely beginning to discover the world.

One such word was "*callous*". Even the slightest laziness would be branded as "*callous*". The term became so overused that it almost turned into a curse word among students.

Then came the word "*smart*", and naturally, its overbearing cousin – "*over smart*". One was a compliment; the other a warning.

Next were the infamous twins: "*Ragging*" and "*Punishment*" – inseparable companions, hand in hand. Within a few days of entering the school, we were well-acquainted with both.

There was an unspoken rule — seniors had the right to rag and punish, while juniors had to accept it without protest. Students just one class above could use our names directly and address us as “tu”, but those two or more years senior students had to be called “dada” and addressed respectfully as “tum”.

At Sainik School, we faced such a wild variety of punishments that it was hard to keep track. But strangely, none of us held a grudge. On the contrary, we took pride in enduring them.

When I was ten, I believed a scolding or an ear twist at home was the harshest punishment possible. But Sainik School opened my eyes — that ear twist was child’s play!

The most common punishment? Kneel — and sometimes kneel while holding your ears.

Seniors slapping, belting, or even kicking juniors weren’t unusual. They used their leather belts like whips. All of this fell under “*corporal punishment*”.

I still remember one scorching summer day in Purulia. We were ordered to crawl or kneel and walk on the dry hockey ground—which, let me clarify, had not a blade of grass. But instead of complaining, we started doing it and enjoyed it thoroughly. “As they say, two heads are better than one — we stand or fall together.” That day, punishment felt like a badge of honour.

Once we were told to run around a cow and return. Simple enough. But the moment we neared the cow, it panicked and bolted—and we ran even harder, chasing the poor thing in sheer desperation.

In hindsight, that chase gave us more laughter than pain—and it remains a cherished memory.

In PT or NCC drills, crawling on elbows and knees was routine. It would tear skin, draw blood from elbows and knees—but to appear “smart,” we would laugh through it.

One day, we were given the punishment: “Keep walking on a kneeling position until your knees bleed.” So, we began our march of agony. But our knees refused to oblige. Then one of our friends actually started bleeding. What did we do? A few of us borrowed his blood and rubbed it on our knees. Mission accomplished. The punishment ended, and we celebrated our victory!

Sometimes, if our hair grew a bit long or we made mistakes during parade, the punishment was a dreaded “bowl cut” (*bati cut*) — an ugly haircut that made us look ridiculous. Letting go of our beloved hair did sting, but once the cut was done and the wind tickled our ears, we felt oddly liberated. It gave a breezy thrill, and our hearts felt lighter.

Once in Class Eight, a few of our friends sneaked out to town on a Saturday night to watch the movie ‘*Kalasona*’. By Sunday morning, the news had reached the seniors. After breakfast, the six culprits were summoned—and beaten mercilessly with NCC belts.

Luckily, the matter wasn’t reported to the principal. But even after such a beating, those boys happily narrated the full movie story to us, as if they had returned from an adventure.

Another time, a boy was caught sleeping in class. The teacher punished him — “Kneel outside the classroom!” He obeyed... and promptly went outside the class and knelt, but started sleeping in that kneeling position. We couldn’t stop laughing when we saw that.

So, is it still punishment if it doesn't hurt? Of course not. Then it becomes something else—a reward. In psychological terms, it is a transition from negative reinforcement to positive reinforcement.

Our childhood at Sainik School was filled with such stories. We endured all sorts of punishments—but we also enjoyed them with all our hearts. So, when I entered medical college later, the ragging there seemed like nothing in comparison. What others found unbearable, we found trivial—thanks to the hardcore training of Sainik School.

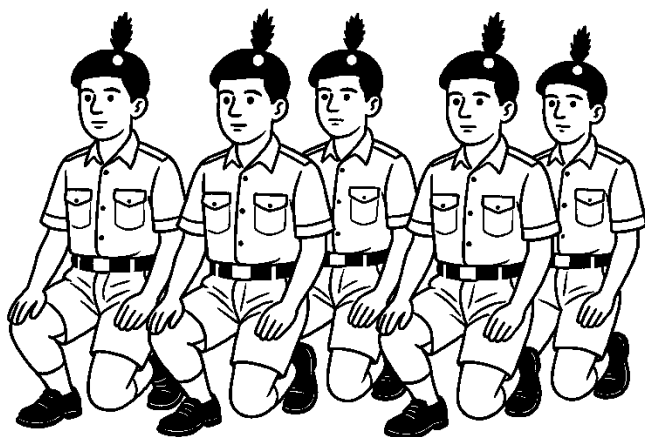
That's why I began this piece with Tagore's melancholic lines:

"Lighting the lamp of all my sorrows..."

But now, at the end, I feel compelled to change the note.

Let me finish with a more fitting verse:

*"The stream of joy flows through the world,
Day and night it moves in endless rhythm.
In the sky resounds the music of light,
In the air trembles the dance of life..."*



The Shoe Polish Chronicle

From the very first day after joining Sainik School, there were a few things I quickly came to understand. Discipline was paramount. Wearing the proper uniform at the designated time was mandatory. And most crucially, dirty shoes were absolutely unacceptable. Shoes had to be immaculately clean and gleaming. If they weren't polished to a shine, punishment was certain.

From the tender age of ten — when we entered Class Five — we had to manage multiple sets of shoes. Black formal shoes, white canvas Keds, heavy boots for NCC, and special football boots with rounded studs on the soles that made a strange squeaking sound in the hostel corridors. We were also instructed to bring along 'running shoes' at the time of admission. Those shoes were rather peculiar — fitted with sharp half-inch spikes at the bottom. Though I had purchased a pair, I never actually used them. I didn't know how they were to be used. Later, I came to know that they were meant for athletes to get a better grip while running. Sure enough, there were a few ace runners in our class who made full use of those 'running shoes'.

Now, coming to the matter of polishing shoes.

We used to wash our white canvas Keds every Sunday with *Sunlight* soap and a scrubbing brush, and after drying them in the sun, we had to apply white chalk polish. That polish came

in two variants: a round one like a white soap cake, and a white liquid polish that came in a long container. The liquid one was a bit expensive, so I rarely got the chance to buy it, but I occasionally borrowed it from friends. In the hostel, nothing really belonged to any one person—everything was communal. A perfect model of socialism!

Sundays saw a polishing frenzy across the hostel. Everyone would sit with their shoe brushes and shoe polish tins, as if participating in a grand competition. In those days, '*Cherry Blossom*' and '*Kiwi*' were the two leading brands of shoe polish. The newer liquid polishes and instant shoe shiners hadn't yet entered the market, so we had no choice but to sit on the floor and polish our shoes like traditional cobblers. Even the brushes came in varieties—soft-bristled and hard-bristled.

First, we applied the polish to the shoe and waited a bit. In that brief interval, we'd squeeze in a round of gossip. Then, inserting four fingers of the left hand inside the shoe and holding it firmly, we'd grip the brush with the right hand and begin rubbing vigorously. The shoe would begin to shine. After that, we'd take a strip of cloth and start buffing the shoe for that final gleam. To get the ultimate shine, we'd wear the shoe and then pull the cloth strip back and forth using both hands. This technique was known as "ragging" the shoe.

But even that wasn't enough. Someone would inevitably show up and say, "Polish your shoes so well that you can see your reflection in them!" That was it—everyone would then obsessively try to find their face on the shoe's surface. We didn't realise back then that the statement was more metaphorical than literal.

Soon, a new polishing method gained popularity— "Water Polish"! What was that? It meant mixing water with polish and

applying it to leather shoes. Until then, we believed water spoiled leather. But we tossed that theory aside and threw ourselves into this new technique with great enthusiasm.

By the time we finished, our hands, faces, and sometimes even our chests would be smudged black with polish. Since water wasn't always available in the hostel, washing up wasn't easy. We'd just wipe our hands on whatever was nearby and move on.

The next day, during the parade, our house captains—and occasionally the school captain—would inspect everyone's shoes. Those with the shiniest shoes earned praise. Let me confess here, despite all my efforts, I never once received such praise for my shoe shine.

Many times, we skipped polishing our shoes altogether. On such days, if we suddenly heard an announcement that the school captain would conduct a surprise shoe inspection, we'd resort to emergency measures. We'd rub the right shoe on the left sock and the left shoe on the right sock—standing up and doing it on the spot. Mission accomplished.



It wasn't just the shoes—we had to polish our belts too. From the very beginning, we were issued khaki trousers and a red leather belt to wear with our NCC dress. On the left side of this belt was a round brass medallion embossed with the Sainik School emblem, through which the belt was fastened and adjusted. This belt wasn't like today's standard belts—it needed polishing! Occasionally, or on the eve of an NCC parade, we would polish the red belt with matching red polish—if we could get our hands on any. Otherwise, we'd just use a dry brush to shine it up. The proper way to do it was to sit on the bed, loop the belt around one knee, and brush it rapidly.

Still, that wasn't the end of our polishing saga.

The brass emblem in the middle would grow dull and dark with use. So, we'd polish it with something called '*Brasso*'—a liquid that came in a tin can and smelled like kerosene. We'd dab it onto a piece of cloth and rub it on the brass medallion. After a bit of rubbing, it would gleam like Aladdin's magic lamp, and the whole room would be filled with the scent of kerosene. These days, '*Pitambari*' has taken the place of Brasso for shining brass items. And for the silver NCC badge on our caps, we used a special polish called '*Silvo*'.

After eight long years of diligently polishing my shoes at school, the habit has stuck with me to this day. Even now, I polish my own shoes. I can't wear them unless they're clean. It goes without saying—we owe a debt of gratitude to Sainik School.

Picnic

When I first joined the hostel of Sainik School in Class V, we were immediately instructed to write letters home every Monday. At that age—barely ten—it was natural for our families to be anxious, knowing that we were living away from home. Every month, we were given a fixed quota of postcards, inlands, stamped envelopes, etc., by our respective housemasters. On Monday mornings, the house captain would collect everyone's letters and drop them in the big red school mailbox. If there was any suspicion, the house captain or the housemasters would open a few letters to censor anything inappropriate or objectionable before posting.

In the beginning, writing letters felt like a tough chore. There was so much to say, but somehow the words wouldn't come. Most of us preferred postcards because they forced us to write less. Some parents even pre-wrote the address on the postcard so that the child just had to scribble a few lines and send it off—reassuring the family that all was well.

That's when I learnt how to properly write an address on an envelope and the difference between address and addressee. One of our classmates, who struggled with arithmetic, would write down math problems in his letters and post them to his home—only to receive the solutions after several days!

All of this sounds like something out of a bygone era now. Today, you can simply call anytime using a mobile phone to

hear a loved one’s voice—or even video call to see their face and chat.

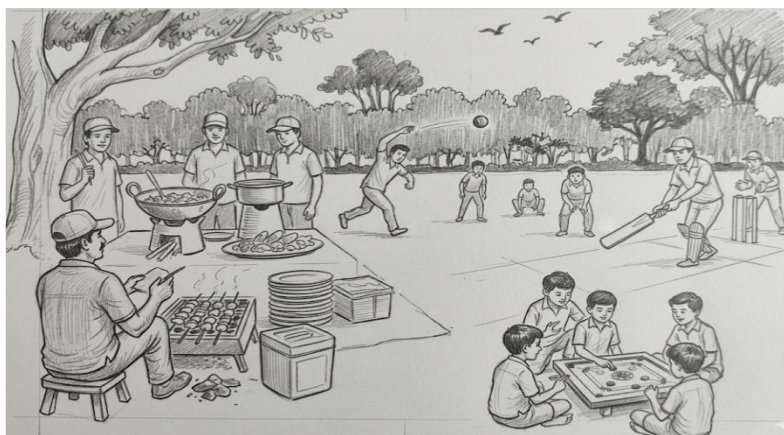
It was around that time, just after the Durga Puja holidays, that we were taken on a one-day picnic trip to Ranchi and Jamshedpur. We left early in the morning and returned by night, travelling by bus. We carried along cooking equipment and even a cook. We visited nearby hills, waterfalls, and the famous Jubilee Park. It was a fun and memorable trip.



The next day, it was time for our weekly letter-writing. Everyone was describing the picnic—the sights we saw, the fun we had. One of my friends, Sankar Routh, had very neat and beautiful English handwriting. He had probably studied in an English-medium school before joining the Sainik School, because he was drafting a lovely English letter describing the picnic in a well-structured way.

Seeing that, I was inspired to write my letter in English too. So, I simply copied his entire letter word for word. In fact, I wrote not just one but two identical letters: one to my mother and the other to my maternal uncle. I carefully wrote the addresses and posted them.

When my family received my English letter, they were stunned! Back then, in a small-town setting, writing a letter fluently in English was considered a big deal. When I came home for the winter holidays in January, they were overjoyed—amazed that I had picked up English so quickly in such a short time. They praised me endlessly, and I quietly enjoyed all the attention. Of course, I never revealed the real story behind the letter—and no one ever found out the truth.



Our Naga Friends

Students from various parts of the Northeast came to study at Sainik School Purulia. In those days, states in the Eastern region that didn't have their own Sainik Schools would send their boys to ours. Among these, there were many students from Nagaland, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh—but the Nagas were the most numerous. Arunachal had just been declared a Union Territory the very year we were admitted to school—1972—so the boys from there introduced themselves as residents of NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency), the old name of Arunachal Pradesh.

In our class, there were four or five Naga boys, and a few more in the junior class below us. They generally kept to themselves—understandably so, as their language and food habits were quite different from ours.

At first, their names sounded strange to us and felt awkward on our tongues. But gradually, we got used to pronouncing them. Some of them were referred to by their tribal titles, which became their accepted names in school. Over time, we even forgot their real names. Now I know that among the Nagas, the title following the name often denotes their tribe. Each tribe has its own distinct language and customs. But when a Naga from one tribe meets another Naga from a different tribe, he converses in a common language called *Nagamese*. Interestingly, Nagamese has many similarities with

Assamese—and Assamese, in turn, shares a lot with Bengali—so we could roughly understand their conversations.

The Naga boys were excellent in physical training, highly skilled in NCC, and superb in sports. Be it football, hockey, volleyball, or basketball—they excelled in all. During the annual school sports meet, they swept medals in running, shot put, discus, and javelin throw. Since there were competitions between the four hostels or sometimes among classes, the hostels with more Naga students had an obvious advantage.

Our first year in school introduced us to a stern-faced Naga school captain. We were still getting used to the new environment, struggling with English, and their accented English sounded even more peculiar to us at the time.

Sundays were our only holidays. We used to wake up late and laze through the day. Some played games, some chatted, some slept, and a few, like me, wandered around the school grounds, ponds, and trees.

The Naga boys, however, always moved in a group. On Sundays, they would go hunting with slingshots. They hunted squirrels in the trees and small birds in the woods. Sometimes, they would wade into ponds or marshes and catch fish, snails, and crabs. But they wouldn't just catch them—they would sneak away to roast or half-cook them and have a hearty meal. Thanks to their escapades, the squirrels practically vanished from the trees.

Every year during the Durga Puja break, we got a week-long holiday. Most of us went home. But boys from far-off places like Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, Dimapur, or Assam often stayed back—seven days just weren't worth the journey.

In 1978, when we were in Class X, a flood hit West Bengal during Durga Puja. Roads were blocked, and I couldn't go home. That year, I got a chance to closely observe our Naga friends' activities during the holidays. After breakfast, I would wander the woods with them until lunchtime. I watched them skilfully hunt with slingshots—but didn't dare to try myself. One morning, I joined them in a small pond for fishing. They had come prepared, even bringing a mosquito net to use as a fishing net. That day, we caught several small, live fish and dug up many crabs from the muddy banks. Since I wasn't used to such ventures, I returned from the filthy water with leeches clinging to both legs. After getting rid of them somehow and heading back to the hostel for lunch, I was astonished to find the same crabs and small fish fried and served to us!



Academically, most of them didn't perform exceptionally well. They barely managed to pass—but in sports and athletics, they were indispensable.

Many of the Naga boys left after Class X. A handful stayed till Class XII, after which they went their separate ways, building careers back home.

Thanks to mobile phones, we've recently reconnected with some of them. One has sadly passed away; a few remain unreachable, but quite a few have risen to prominent positions—some in Nagaland, others in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. Though we don't get to meet, we sometimes hear from them. And whenever we do, their school-day adventures come flooding back.

"Let the vessel be full with nectar of memories..."



At the Threshold of Adolescence

I don't exactly remember when adolescence first crept into our bodies, but I do remember beginning to *feel* it—thanks to the movie *Bobby*. By the time we were in Class 7, we had started noticing subtle physical changes. The emotional changes took a little longer to recognise. We grew up knowing that everything related to puberty was somehow taboo—love stories, adult films, or even conversations about sex were all considered *forbidden fruit*. Even the word *mensuration*, a part of our geometry syllabus, had to be pronounced with extreme caution. Proper sex education was virtually non-existent, so we grew up with half-baked ideas rather than a proper understanding. There were no Android phones, no internet, and certainly no open discussions around sexuality.

Since not everyone in our class was the same age, adolescence hit each of us at different times, though not too far apart. It felt more like an ambush than a gentle arrival, like an uninvited guest sneaking in. Suddenly, hair began appearing in unfamiliar places, faint traces of a moustache and a beard sprouted like tender shoots in a paddy field, and our voices began cracking—as if a frog had taken permanent residence in our throats. The childlike features slowly faded, replaced by angry-looking pimples that took over our faces. Even the mirror started showing us a stranger's reflection. Our hair became impossible to tame; we kept trying new hairstyles, but nothing ever seemed satisfying.

It was during this phase—when the winds of adolescence had just begun brushing against me—that one of our hostel mates began secretly reading a book aloud to us at night. He had smuggled it from home, a Hindi book, no less. I hardly understood a word of Hindi at the time, and on top of that, sleep kept closing my eyes. Since I couldn't grasp anything, I felt neither curiosity nor excitement. Still, I sat through it, half-dozing. One thing was clear, though—it was a *forbidden book*.

Just then, a senior happened to pass by, noticed the light in our room, and barged in. Before we could react, he confiscated the book. That jolted me wide awake. My friend was furious—his prized possession had been seized. I whispered nervously, “Now what?” He shrugged, saying, “It's written in pure Hindi. He won't understand a word.” And he was right. The next day, the book came back into circulation. What happened after that, I don't know.



Our school was a residential boys' school—there were no girls around. So, adolescence came like a solitary storm. It felt like we were living in some ancient hermitage, following brahmacharya. The absence of girls only intensified our curiosity about them.

When we were in Class 8, a new Hindi-speaking teacher joined. I can't recall whether he taught History or English, but he had a daughter of our age. She was admitted into our class—an exception to the usual all-boys rule. Since she was the teacher's daughter, she would come to class from the campus quarters. Naturally, we were abuzz with speculation—where would she sit, who would she talk to, whom would she ignore? She stayed for about a year, and when her father left the job, she too vanished like a dream. Once again, we were back to being an all-boys class.

I still remember her first day—some mischievous soul had quietly slipped a live frog into her desk drawer. The moment she opened it, the frog leapt out. Chaos erupted. The girl turned crimson with embarrassment and fear, while we boys enjoyed the scene with reckless glee. That's what they call *vicarious pleasure*, perhaps—one of the many mischiefs of adolescence. Like a wave, it comes and goes.

But adolescence is relentless. Sexual curiosity *will* emerge. That's libido. At that age, libido finds expression in poetry, in games, in art, and in tangled human relationships. Friendships bloom, but when lust enters the equation, it ceases to remain innocent. There were times in the hostel when boys felt attraction for other boys—intense, emotional connections. Was it homosexuality? Maybe, but it was fleeting, not permanent.

After school, I pondered this deeply. Years later, as a psychiatrist, I found my answer. It's what we call *Obligatory*

Homosexuality, Transitory Homosexuality, or Ego-dystonic Homosexuality. It's something that can happen when there is no alternative—like in prisons, military barracks, all-boys hostels, or traditional celibate institutions.

One of my favourite authors, psychoanalyst Professor Salman Akhtar, once said in a lecture that most people struggle with five deep inner dilemmas over the course of their lives. For a few moments, at least, they feel genuinely torn. First, about gender—whether one is truly male or female. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, spoke of this duality too. He called it *Anima* and *Animus*, suggesting that both masculine and feminine traits reside in every individual.



Second, life versus death. Even though we know death is inevitable, we secretly like to think we are immortal. And

sometimes, in extreme moments, we question if we are even truly alive.

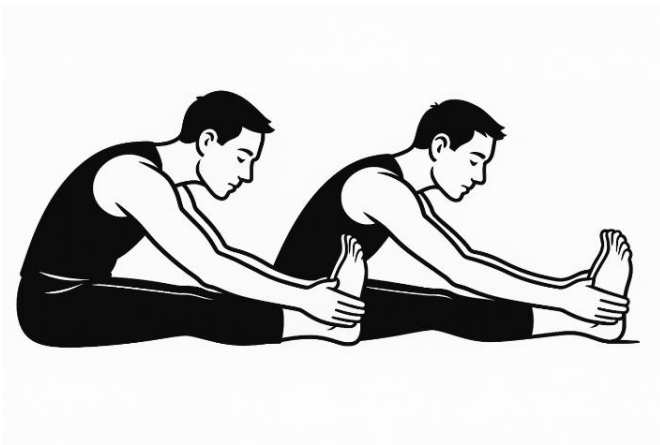
Third, belief in God. Even the most devout person may suddenly lose faith and ask, “Why is this happening to me if I pray so much?” And an atheist may instinctively exclaim, “Oh God!” in a moment of panic.

Fourth, whether one is active or passive. At crucial times, despite having the ability to act, we do nothing – and then feel regret, shame, and guilt. We wonder – am I truly someone who takes initiative, or just a passive bystander?

And fifth – whether one is homosexual or heterosexual. This last dilemma is perhaps the most relevant here.



Standing at the threshold of adolescence, amidst all the turmoil of body and mind, there was one song by Rabindranath Tagore that used to calm me. I would hum it softly, and my restless heart would find peace:

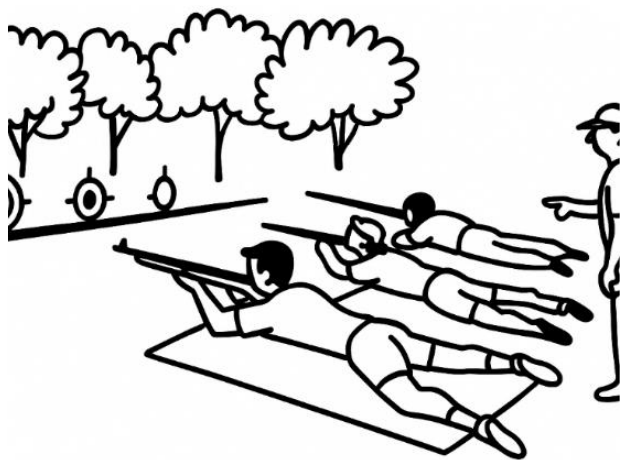


*“Touch my soul with the magic fire of heaven,
Sanctify this life of mine with the gift of that fiery pain.
Lift this body of mine and hold it high,
Make it the lamp of Your temple.
Let the bright flame of light burn day and night in song.
Your touch on the skin of darkness,
Let the stars bloom anew throughout the night.
All darkness will disappear from the eyes' vision,
Wherever I look, I shall see light...”*

Games and Co-Curricular Activities

At our Sainik School, each student was taught a bit of everything. There was ample opportunity to participate in various co-curricular activities. In fact, to me, academics seemed secondary – what truly took centre stage were the co-curricular pursuits! We were trained in a wide range of areas: sports, recitation, public speaking, debates, music, dramatics – you name it. I’ve heard they’ve added swimming and horse-riding to the mix these days.

These weren’t just taught – they were part of annual competitions. Those who won would be felicitated in front of everyone during the Annual Day celebration.



There was no dearth of sports – football, hockey, cricket, volleyball, basketball, boxing, table tennis, and badminton.

Every day, an hour after lunch, from three to five in the afternoon, it was compulsory for all of us to participate in games.

The school campus was dotted with numerous playgrounds, each with its own number or name. Since games were mandatory, each field was allocated to specific classes on a rotational basis. The notice board would list which class played what, and where. We simply followed orders.



Some of the football fields were outside the main school gate — across the Ranchi Road — and we'd be escorted there by a teacher. There were about four football grounds near the railway tracks reserved for us. A small narrow-gauge train used to chug along that track. We never really knew where it went, but every afternoon, as we played, the train would pass by on its way to Purulia station, its soft '*koo-jhik-jhik*' sound often tugging at my heartstrings and reminding me of home. Some of us would run alongside it just for fun, racing up to the edge of the field and circling back. It was our own little game. Even now, when I recall those moments, the image of *Apu*

from *Pather Panchali* flashes before my eyes. I suppose there's a little village-boy *Apu* hidden in all of us.

Nowadays, I hear students no longer play on those grounds. Technically, the land wasn't part of the school's property anymore. I believe the area is now occupied by a new institution called '*Sidho-Kanho University*'.



Our main hockey field was located just behind the Patel and Tagore Houses. It had no grass, so if you fell while playing, getting bruised and scraped injuries was unavoidable. That very field also served as the spot where we were made to kneel in punishment—often in half-pants. I won't describe what came next.

The main volleyball and basketball courts were a little ahead of the main water tank, right before the hospital. The two courts sat side by side like twin brothers. And just a little farther off loomed a cemented enclosure, intimidating like a villain—that was our boxing ring. Most of the year, it lay

unused until the annual boxing competitions arrived, and then it would come alive.

Table tennis was an indoor game and was played in the common room between Tilak and Chittaranjan Houses. We barely played there, except during competitions. During those matches, we'd crowd around the table, cheering the players on. In today's lingo, we'd be called cheerleaders!



In hindsight, even though I was never a great athlete, I was exposed to all kinds of games at school—and that has served me well in life, both personally and professionally.

Outside of sports, the other co-curricular activities were structured into our weekly routine. Every Saturday evening, instead of regular prep time (study hours), we held public speaking competitions on various topics and in multiple languages (English, Bengali, and Hindi). Some Saturdays were for debates, others for quiz competitions.

After roll call in our white full pants, white long-sleeved shirts, white socks, and black shoes, we'd be marched in line to the

assembly hall and seated on designated wooden chairs. I still remember—the backs of the chairs had ‘S.S.P’ carved in an oval design, and beneath each chair, the proper placement location was marked in black ink. Thankfully, plastic chairs weren’t a thing back then, or we’d have missed the chance to sit on those lovely wooden seats.



Initially, we barely understood anything in the lectures and found them terribly boring. Debates and quiz contests were more engaging—they felt lively, and we didn’t fall asleep during those. But during the lectures, we’d often doze off in the back rows or amuse ourselves by playing word games and scribbling on paper with our friends.

Once the session ended, a bell would ring, and we’d gleefully line up for dinner. On the way, I’d wonder to myself – “What’s on the dinner menu tonight?”



Music, Drama, and the Inter-House Cultural Fest

Alongside sports, music and drama held a special place in our school lives. Every year, at a designated time, students would represent their respective houses and put up cultural performances for all to see.

Those were moments that left a sweet aftertaste in our hearts. Each house was allotted a separate evening to present its performance in the school auditorium. And yes—rehearsals were a big deal! If you were part of the rehearsal team, you could even skip morning PT without punishment.

The auditorium was located at one end of the school building—just past the Art and Crafts classrooms and across a semi-permanent path lined with trees. It was a long, single-storied hall with a tin roof. When it rained, the thunderous noise of the drops drumming against the roof made it hard to hear anything inside. At one end of the hall stood a raised stage, fronted by colourful curtains that had to be drawn by hand. There was a small green room tucked in behind the stage. On the opposite side, rows of chairs were arranged for the audience. In the front row, elegant sofas were laid out for the Principal, Headmaster, and Registrar—often seated with their families. The judges sat just ahead of them.

The entry door to the auditorium was at the far end — a large, imposing one. On the day of the event, the entire hall, from the entryway to the stage, would be decorated like a wedding venue. As the clock struck six and the school bell rang, the programme would begin.

After days of preparation, each participant gave their best performance. We, the audience, sat with anticipation, eager to witness something new. The evening would usually conclude with a one-act play lasting about an hour. Since ours was a boys' school, there were no female students, so plays with female roles were generally avoided. But now and then, a good script would have one or two female characters. In such cases, a boy would have to don makeup and perform the part. And once the play was over, that 'unfortunate' actor would become the subject of endless jokes and teasing. The poor chap would be laughed at, ogled from all sides, and worst of all, he would be tagged with a 'girlish' label—a heavy burden for someone on the cusp of adolescence.



The plays were usually in Bengali or English. Some of the standout performances still shine vividly in my memory—*Tepantorer Maath*, *Marich*

Sangbad by playwright Manoj Mitra, and English plays like *The Sentinel* and *The Merchant of Venice*, to name a few.

Tagore House staged *Marich Sangbad*. What made it truly memorable was the entrance of the narrator—a *madari* (traditional street performer)—who beat his drum as he entered from the audience's side, delivering lines while walking up to the stage. That technique was a novelty in those days, and his performance was exceptional. The *madari* was played by our classmate Alope, who acted brilliantly. I had a role too—a limping character—and the following year, thanks to that performance, I was promoted to the school's drama team.



In English drama, one name that comes to mind is our classmate, Arindam Mitra. He's now in some faraway land, doing well for himself. I doubt he remembers that play—but

here we are, stirring old memories and reliving the joy of those days!

I still remember one play by Chittaranjan House—*Tepantorer Maath*. It had several roles, and our classmate Sukanta nailed the part of *Ramgarurer Chhana*. During the play, the power suddenly went out, and the stage was plunged into darkness. Sukanta, without missing a beat, brought out a Petromax lamp from backstage, placed it on stage, and improvised his lines to suit the situation. His presence of mind was widely praised that day. It's those small moments that carve deep notches in our memories, giving us joy when we look back. As they say, "Memories are always sweet."

Tilak House had a similar memorable act where one performer entered the stage singing a song from the other end. The act was inspired by the iconic Hindi film *Upkar*, where the character played by Pran walks with a crutch while singing "*Kasme Vaade Pyaar Wafa Sab...*" in Manna Dey's voice. That song and performance won every heart that day—and that's why we still remember it so vividly.



Our Sainik School had a few ‘staple’ singers—those who sang from the beginning of school till the very end. This trend extended to other co-curricular competitions as well.

By good fortune, both star singers from our batch were in Tagore House. Subhashis, a classically trained singer, also played the harmonium. And Aloke—gifted by God—sang effortlessly without any formal training.

Sometimes, students performed *skits*—short, humorous, and satirical plays. These activities we thoroughly enjoyed.

The cultural night usually included group songs, solo vocals, group dances, and qawwalis. Back then, with no TV or mobile phones, we didn’t have much access to shows or entertainment. These programmes were our soul-food—our source of joy.

Those school plays sparked a deep passion for theatre in me. After passing Class XII and returning home, I promptly enrolled in a professional theatre group. But that’s a story for another day.



In hindsight, I truly believe that the absence of TV and mobile phones made our lives simpler, easier, and so much more meaningful.

Eventually, I got married and became a doctor. And now? Every day feels like a new play. I'm acting daily, performing my role. The only question is — when will the final curtain fall on this stage?

Parents' Day

In our Sainik School, there were a few designated days each year when family members could come visit us. These days were called “Parents’ Day.” Usually, it was held on Sundays. On Parents’ Day, we saw many mothers and fathers arrive with all sorts of delicious food for their sons. From the morning, parents would begin to arrive. They would sit with their sons on the high, D-shaped concrete platform just outside the hostel. Some mothers, flouting the rules, would even go inside rooms to tidy their sons’ wardrobes.

Some fathers, meanwhile, would sit and help their sons understand difficult lessons, or even solve and explain tough maths problems within that short span of time. Watching all this from a distance, I used to feel pangs of envy.

A few of us, like me, had no one from home ever come to visit. We would simply linger nearby and soak in the warmth of others’ parental affection. Throughout my school life, no one from my family ever came on Parents’ Day. Not because they didn’t want to—circumstances just didn’t allow it. I’m sure others like me had their own reasons too.

In the evening, when the visiting parents would leave, their sons would return to their rooms with gloomy faces. That was when we’d get our chance—to share their food stash. Most of the time, the haul would include biscuits, coconut sweets,

roasted peanuts, or spicy *chanachur*. Everyone would share, and some would save a portion to relish later.

Among us was a boy named Chandradeo Chaubey. He'd return from holidays with an impressive stash of goodies from home and secretly hoard them for himself. But his stock was no ordinary fare. No plain biscuits or *chanachur* for him—he brought cashews, dates, walnuts, roasted gram, and more. We could never quite figure out when or where he managed to eat them. However, one of his roommates did. Chandradeo would lock his trunk and tie the key to his sacred thread (*paita*), wearing it around his neck. The thread and key combination would only be removed once a day, just before bathing and using the toilet facilities. He would then hide the key under his pillow, go about his routine and come back to reclaim it.

His secretive food mission went on like this for a while.

Then, in Class XI, his roommate and some others hatched a little Robin Hood-style plot. They decided to break into his treasure chest—not just to steal, but to “redistribute.” They patiently waited for the right moment—when Chandradeo removed his sacred thread and went to bathe. They stood guard, unlocked the trunk, and made off with the whole stash—without his noticing a thing. That particular time, the treats were especially high-end: cashews, dates, gram, and more. First, the little band of looters feasted. Teenage appetites being what they are, they devoured a good share of it. Then came a brilliant idea: why not gift the rest anonymously to everyone in class?

And so, in the morning, after the PT period, we entered our classroom to find small piles of dry fruits and sweets laid out on pieces of paper on each desk, like sacred offerings. We gobbled them up with delight, thanking the unknown

benefactor. Someone even wrote “Thank You” on the blackboard in big bold letters.

Had the story ended there, it would have been perfect. But that evening, things took a turn.

After dinner, during the prep session, Chandradeo entered the classroom. His face was grim, composed, and withdrawn. In fact, from the morning itself, he had seemed unusually silent. Around ten that night, he left the class alone, walking toward the hostel via the shortcut near the milk-break corridor. Another friend returning to the hostel spotted him lying down on the path. Alarmed, he rushed back and informed us. We ran over, picked up the semi-conscious Chandradeo, and carried him to the school infirmary.

Our school hospital was a modest medical unit, manned 24x7 by a pharmacist. The doctor came only thrice a week. So, while Chandradeo was admitted, only basic care could be provided until the doctor’s next visit. By morning, his behaviour turned bizarre. He said he wanted to go to the pond – then once there, he threatened to jump in. We took turns watching over him, anxious, making sure he didn’t hurt himself.

When the doctor finally arrived, he examined him and prescribed some medicine, seemingly unconcerned. He scribbled down the diagnosis and treatment in the giant Medical Record Book – our very own *‘Book of Yama.’*

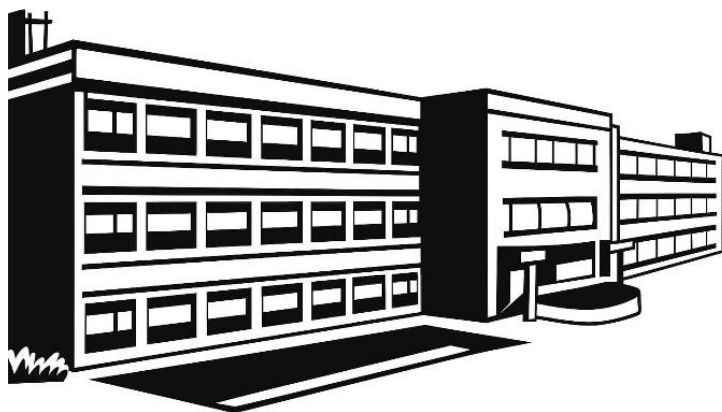
Our curiosity eventually got the better of us. We sneaked a look into the record book to see what mysterious ailment had struck our friend.

Beside Chandradeo’s name, the doctor had written: **“Malingering.”**

None of us had any clue what it meant. We had heard of many illnesses, but this word was completely foreign. We rushed to the library and opened the dictionary. And then we laughed out loud. It meant *faking illness*.

It wasn't a real disease at all. Chandradeo had simply put on an act. Our guilt melted away—we had already digested the cashews, and now our conscience was also clear.

Even though he took the prescribed medication, Chandradeo never quite returned to normal. His family was informed, and they came to take him home. We, meanwhile, got busy preparing for our Class XII board exam. Of course, we remembered him—but no one knew what he was up to or how he was doing.



Then, just a few days before the final exam, he returned to school and visited the hostel. This time, however, there were no dry fruits. He had always been a quiet boy, and now he was even more withdrawn. No one dared disturb him or ask what had happened. One day, he himself revealed that something had affected his brain. He had seen several doctors in Patna and recovered, though they had advised him not to take

mental stress. We, naturally, weren't going to let that slide so easily. In the course of the conversation, he showed us a bunch of prescriptions. The last one was from a psychiatrist. Most of the medicines were just vitamins and tonics—essentially placebos.

So, it turned out that our school doctor's diagnosis of "Malingering" had been spot on.

Years later, I became a doctor myself, that too - a psychiatrist, in fact. Now I know that "malingering" is a recognised psychiatric condition. I come across such patients often, and every time I do, I'm reminded of Chandradeo. That was my first real brush with the condition. My very first lesson in *Malingering*.

The Attic

In earlier days, every pucca house with a staircase and a roof would typically have an attic space at the top. If the landing of the staircase wasn't covered, rainwater would leak in. So, people would cover that part, and a small room would be created beside it. With the rise of apartment living, the concept of the attic has quietly disappeared. But during adolescence and early youth, the attic used to be an irresistibly charming and mysterious place. In Bengali literature, many authors have written stories about youthful adventures that took place in these secluded nooks. In large joint families, where many members lived together, this was often the perfect hideout for unemployed young men seeking privacy.

For us too, the attic was the place where we first tried our hand at smoking—beedi or cigarette. It was where we wrote love letters, scribbled poetry, tried our hand at learning the guitar or the flute. Whenever we visited a friend's house, the attic was where we preferred to hang out. It was the den for all things forbidden—books, secrets, and rebellious experiments. The attic felt like a portal to another world.

When we joined Sainik School, the hostel building had three floors. Each floor had three rooms. On one end was a wide staircase, and on the other, the bathrooms and a storeroom we called the 'trunk room.' Right beside it, in the corner, was a narrow iron spiral staircase—something we called the 'spiral

staircase.’ That trunk room was usually empty. Occasionally, the warden would sit there. During holidays—summer, winter, or Puja—we’d pack our things into our trunks, lock them, and store them there. The warden would then lock the room, only to reopen it once school resumed. For junior boys like us, that spiral staircase was strictly off-limits. Its door remained shut, and what lay beyond was pitch dark. I often wondered—why was this staircase even built, if we weren’t supposed to use it? Later, I learnt it was meant to be an emergency exit, and also served as a utility route for the janitors cleaning the bathrooms.

A few years passed. Occasionally, we would find the door to that staircase open. One day, summoning the courage, I climbed up the dark, winding steps and reached the attic—known to us as “the attic” but officially called the “attic space.” It was still forbidden territory. There was light inside, but the rooftop exit was locked. That day, I just looked around, but the curiosity remained.

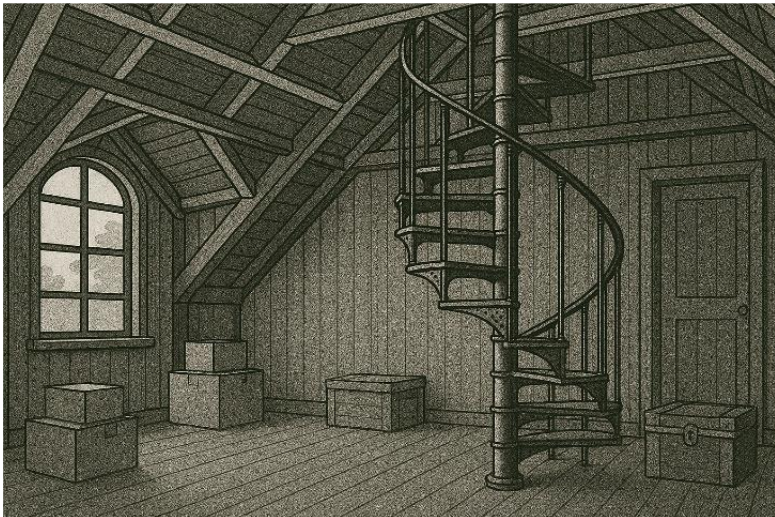


Sometimes during evening baths, the water supply would suddenly stop. When that happened, the overhead tank would

fill up first. We would hurriedly grab towels, soap still lathered over our bodies, and rush down the spiral staircase to finish bathing.

Eventually, the attic and the staircase lost their taboo. The lock to the attic passage was removed, and we could come and go as we pleased. One senior student would go up there during holidays to read in solitude. Whether he actually studied or not, we didn't know—but he certainly succeeded in creating distance from the rest of us.

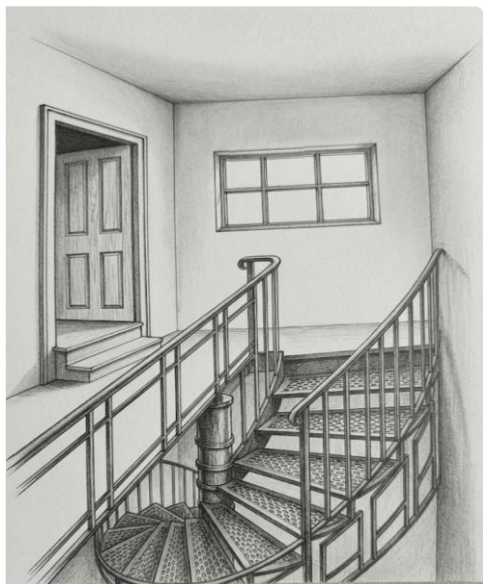
Once we became seniors, that attic became the stage for many of our “firsts.” Chief among them was smoking cigarettes. Our classmate, the eccentric Dashu, turned the attic into a lab of mischief. He would cook up exotic dishes with his Naga friends—grilled squirrel meat, tiny fish, crabs—right there in secret. Sometimes, he would even adopt small animals and keep them hidden. Sadly, they would perish within days due to neglect or starvation.



In Class IX, one of our hostel mates drowned during an NCC camp. After that, *Dashu* got it into his head that he would communicate with the departed soul through a planchette. But for that, one needed an undisturbed space. In the hostel, there was only one such place—the attic.

Once, just before the summer break, with only a few days left before we were to go home, the hostel environment had become rather relaxed. We planned a little adventure. One night, we sneaked up the spiral staircase, carried our mattresses across the attic to the rooftop, and slept under the open sky. The next morning, we came down feeling like we had conquered a battlefield.

These days, attics aren't a common sight in homes. Even if they exist, no one pays them much attention. In the days of large joint families, the attic was considered a precious extra room. But now, in the era of flats, neither joint families nor attics exist.



The Eccentric Dashu

There's probably an eccentric Dashu in every school batch—one of those curious, oddball characters who are constantly the subject of jokes, speculation, and admiration. Looking back, it's amazing to think about them. The present generation might call their antics *lateral thinking* or *out-of-the-box creativity*. Which means the '*Pagla Dashu*' archetype existed back then, too—and still does.

In our class, Dashu was dusky, thin, and wiry, often doing strange things—not for attention, mind you, but driven by an innate urge to create something new. Once, he killed a long snake, salted and dried its skin and made it into a belt. When worn over pants, its yellow-white patches gave the illusion that a snake was coiled around his waist. This was in the 1970s, probably around 1975. Had it been today, any fashion designer would have snapped up the idea. But back then, people just looked at it with raised eyebrows.

Once, our school organised a trip to Digha by bus. After enjoying ourselves at the beach, we all returned with typical souvenirs—shells, conches, that sort of thing. But *Dashu*, ever the maverick, smuggled in a live, oversized turtle on top of the bus without anyone noticing. That's when we first learned—thanks to him—that if you flip a turtle onto its back, it can't move. He kept that huge turtle in the attic of our hostel for a few days. Whether it died naturally or *Dashu* decided to make

“good use” of its meat, I couldn’t quite recall. What I do remember is that he turned its hard skull into an ashtray and decorated his room with the beautifully cleaned shell.

In another of his culinary adventures, Dashu once teamed up with a few boys to secretly catch frogs and taste their meat. At a time when even possessing matchsticks in the hostel was a punishable offence, he built a tiny brick stove, lit it with paper and wooden splinters, and cooked frog meat right there.

Around class nine or ten, Dashu started acting in plays and soon became a sensation. His first role was in “*Tepantarar Mathe*”, a Bengali play, where he gave a stunning performance that grabbed everyone’s attention. From then on, he became a regular in drama competitions and even joined the school’s theatre group. One day, he told me that after passing Class Twelve, he wanted to study at the National School of Drama. That wild ambition got me dreaming too.

During that adolescent twilight between childhood and adulthood—when we had just begun experimenting with cigarettes—*Dashu* took it to another level. He would light a matchstick, blow it out, quickly pop it into his mouth, draw smoke, then eject a long stream of it like a dragon. We watched in awe but never dared try it. And if we did, it never quite looked the same.

Once, when we were in Class Eight or Nine, news broke that an unclaimed dead body had been found at the far boundary of our school. None of us had seen an unclaimed corpse before, so curiosity got the better of us. Although we were warned that going there might get us entangled in police investigations, we couldn’t resist.

But *Dashu* went alone, sat beside the body and began sketching it. Our art teacher had once said that sketching a dead body was a rare opportunity, and *Dashu* took it to heart. Without fear, he sat there until evening, capturing every detail.

You must be wondering what became of *Pagla Dashu*. Did he go to the theatre? Join an art school? Not quite. After class eleven, he cleared the entrance exam for the NDA (National Defence Academy) and chose that path instead. He was initially declared “temporarily unfit” in the medical test, but did something extraordinary to pass the re-examination (that’s another story). While others joined the Army or Air Force, he opted for the Indian Navy. After completing his service, he retired and became a faculty member and subsequently the Dean at a Marine Engineering college. Somewhere along the way, he also earned a BTech and later an MTech in submarine technology – without most of us even knowing!

By then, *Dashu* had seriously studied art on his own and strengthened his foundation. What had started as a hobby became a passion. His innate creativity blossomed, and soon he was internationally recognised for his collage art using paper cuttings. He created his own style in the art world. Major cities across India hosted his exhibitions, and art lovers started buying his massive six-foot collages.

Dashu eventually moved far from the city to live a more grounded, spacious life. He planted flowers, fruits, and vegetables, immersing himself in nature and art. His garden had a Japanese pond with colourful fish. He lived freely, working on his own ideas, creating his own lifestyle. Quietly, he started inventing his own gadgets. He built an oven and began baking from home—his pizzas became legendary among friends. The interior of his home—shall we call it a

haveli? It was a fusion of self-made artworks that gave it a unique aesthetic. What's remarkable is that everything was handcrafted and self-conceptualised. I was stunned by the seating area in his farmstead, built entirely by hand.

Seeing *Dashu* now reminds me of that physics professor from Santiniketan who built all his tools using natural methods and lived a life of contentment. Perhaps one day *Dashu's* inventions will be patented and made universal. But that's not his concern. To us, he's gone from being the eccentric *Dashu* to a real-life Professor Shonku. But he couldn't care less—he remains absorbed in his art. He won't beat his own drum. If someone else does, and people hear the sound, so be it.



Just before my third book was released, I thought of him for the cover design. My second book also featured artwork by a school friend. But reaching *Dashu* was difficult—he didn't even use a mobile phone at the time. Eventually, we

connected, and one of his exquisite collages transformed my book cover and elevated its artistic value.

Now, when I think back, I thank my stars that he took the call that day. If he hadn't, my book would never have had such a magnificent cover.

Saturday Adda

Back in school, Saturdays in the hostel didn't mean much—at least not until I reached Class Seven and adolescence quietly crept in. Sundays were always holidays, and we eagerly waited for them so we could sleep in a bit longer. But the true charm of Saturdays came alive only when our Saturday night addas began.

Saturday dinners were special. They were what we called 'English Dinner'—bread, a bowl of vegetable soup, an aloo chop, and a cutlet. Dessert was usually custard or something sweet. After such a satisfying meal, our spirits would naturally lift. Everyone gathered in their rooms, chatting away. There was a certain relaxed air—no one hurried us to switch off the lights, unlike on other days.

Over time, our late-night addas stretched longer and longer. It became an addiction of sorts. A Saturday night without Adda felt incomplete. Some nights, we chatted until dawn, birdsong trickling in through the hostel windows.

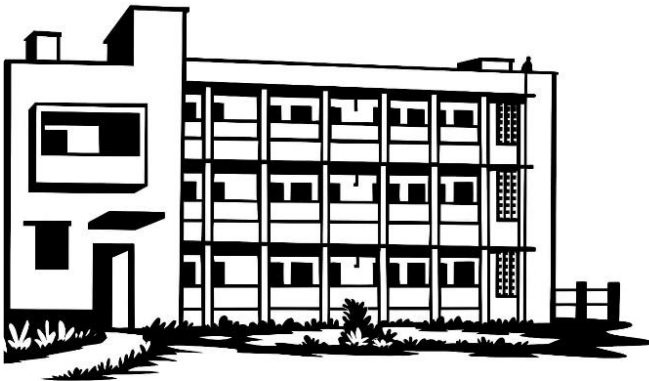
Occasionally, a senior would drop in, asking casually, "What's up?" and join the circle. He'd launch into the most wildly imaginative stories—tales that blurred the line between fiction and fact. At that age, we couldn't really tell what was real and what wasn't. We devoured every word with wide-eyed wonder. We loved that senior. He taught us how to dream, how to weave magical webs of imagination. Later, when he

stood gesturing dramatically while narrating tales, one of us would mimic rolling a spool of thread behind him—a signal that he was spinning tall tales and we should take them with a pinch of salt. Sometimes he’d catch on to our suppressed giggles and declare, “Believe what you will—gobble up as much as you like!”

Luckily, there were no mobile phones then. Otherwise, we’d probably be buried in screens instead of losing ourselves in freewheeling conversations.

In the winter, when the cold bit deep, we’d come up with outrageous challenges. If anyone dared to bathe in freezing water, they’d win a chop from Saturday’s English Dinner. One of our friends actually did it—and proudly claimed his reward.

Today, those moments may seem trivial. Perhaps the present generation would scoff at them. But we found immense joy in those small things. That’s why, even now, these memories shine like pearls, safely tucked in the treasure chest of my heart.



Another daring challenge we had: crossing the campus at midnight—from the hostel, past the staff quarters, all the way to Lotus Pond. Anyone brave enough had to first be scared out of their wits with a barrage of ghost stories. That was usually enough to send them scurrying back.

Our school campus was huge—around 314 acres. Behind the hostel was the hockey field, beyond which were the staff quarters where our teachers lived. One side had the dhobi quarters, and the other had long rows of staff flats. Beyond the dhobi quarters lay the end of civilisation—open fields stretching endlessly like the barren plains of epics. One direction led to Lotus Pond, and a little to the south stood alone a Shiva temple. Beyond that was the end of the campus and the beginning of a village. The place was eerily quiet, sending a shiver down the spine even in broad daylight. At night, going there alone was unthinkable.

One such night, while playing that game, Alok took up the challenge and walked off into the darkness. We didn't stop him, but as time passed, we began to worry. I eventually went looking for him and found him near the back field. We returned to our room, where the others were anxiously waiting. And then, Alok told us his story—let's hear it in his own words.

"I went past the temple and reached Lotus Pond—that was our final frontier. At first, I felt a bit uneasy, but once I realised no ghosts were lurking, I relaxed and even felt proud for having braved it. But as I returned and reached the temple again, I suddenly saw a man carrying a bamboo tray of *chanachur* and peanuts with a flickering oil lamp atop. I felt relieved—at least I wasn't alone anymore—and even decided to buy some peanuts. But as he lowered the tray and began to weigh the

peanuts, I noticed something horrifying — he had no fingers on either hand! Yet he was working as if nothing was wrong. I was petrified and took off running. After a while, I saw another man coming from the opposite direction. He wore a dhoti and looked like someone from a village *jatra* troupe — his skin was dark, his hair slicked back. He was cheerfully singing to himself. I stopped him, gasping, and recounted what I'd just seen. He calmly looked at me, extended his hands and asked, '*Kaisa babu, aisa?*' And I saw — he too had no fingers. His jet-black face cracked into a grin, revealing white teeth. That was it. I ran like mad and finally saw you near the field."

By the end of Alok's story, I was frozen. But after a few moments, I noticed his face looked calm — maybe too calm. Was he just making it all up? After all, he was a master at spinning yarns.



Whatever the case, we both went back to the adda room and narrated the story with full drama and flair. Everyone listened

with rapt attention – and afterwards, quietly retreated to their rooms. That night, fear and awe lingered in every eye. Each of them could vividly picture the grotesque, fingerless man saying, “*Kaisa babu, aisa?*”

From then on, that line – “*Kaisa babu, aisa?*” – became our signature scare tactic. Whenever I met Alok, we’d say it and burst into laughter. Later, we told the tale to our children too – adding spice and theatrics to the legend.

That phrase still echoes in my memory.

The Boxing Game

I had heard of the sport called boxing, but never quite knew how it was actually played. It was only after I got admitted to Sainik School at the age of ten that I witnessed a boxing match for the first time, live before my eyes. Our school had a boxing ring, although it mostly remained unused throughout the year. A few days before any competition, the place would be cleaned and given a makeover. The ring stood elevated on a square platform with staircases on either side for the boxers to enter. Thick ropes enclosed the square, forming four corners tight and springy enough to act as shock absorbers during a match.

Wearing boxing gloves during practice always felt awkward. I wasn't ready to fight – I'd be too busy fumbling with my gloved hands! It didn't take long to realise that for gentle souls like me, avoiding punches was far better than attempting to throw them. But not playing wasn't an option either – the sport was compulsory.

We were divided into groups based on weight. The lightest ones were labelled 'Hydrogen', and at the top were categories like 'Lightweight', 'Featherweight', and 'Heavyweight'. What strange, amusing names! I recall names like 'Mosquito' and 'Butterfly', though I may be misremembering. Everyone secretly hoped to land in a lighter group – fewer bruises that way. But fate was non-negotiable – you got placed according

to your actual weight. Back then, skinny boys made us feel envious, while the overweight ones inspired a curious mix of sympathy and silent relief.

On a designated day, body weight was measured. Many skipped meals to shave off grams; some would run laps in desperation to drop a few ounces. Looking back, all of that now seems like childish folly. Some even feigned illness to get admitted to the infirmary and avoid the match. Others claimed wrist injuries and presented medical notes to escape the ring.

But of course, not everyone tried to run away. Some were truly passionate — they loved the sport and proudly declared themselves as boxers. A few went so far as to throw open challenges with full confidence, declaring, ‘I am the greatest!’ Once, our school captain proclaimed in front of the whole assembly that no one could defeat him. Unsurprisingly, someone who held a grudge seized the opportunity and accepted the challenge. What followed in the ring was a fiery clash until our referee, Mr Singh, had to intervene and halt the match.

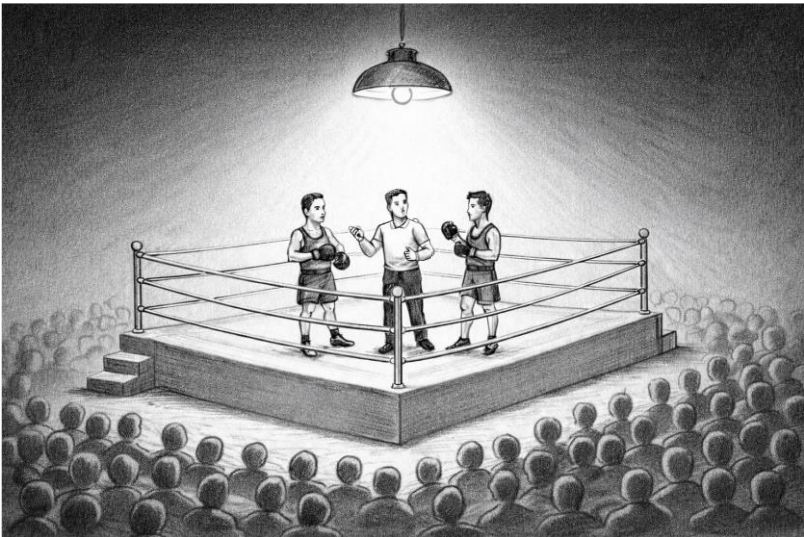
Some of my friends already had experience — they had practised boxing in clubs before joining school. One of them once said, “If your nose gets broken once in a match, it doesn’t hurt much if you’re punched there again in the future.” I found it hard to decide whether that was fortune or misfortune!

Initially, I quite enjoyed watching the matches. Gradually, I learned how the game was played. There were three rounds, with breaks in between. During the interval, the boxers sipped water while an attendant massaged their arms and legs and wiped their faces with cold towels. The bell would clang again, the referee would shout, “Seconds out of the ring!” and the

next round would begin. Truth be told, I found the massage break more fascinating than the actual match!

And then my name was announced. I climbed into the ring, terrified, feeling exactly like Mr Bean. With gloves on and silent prayers in my heart, I faced my opponent — and got thrashed! Blood trickled from my nose, my body ached, but somehow, I survived all three rounds. I lost, yes, but at least I didn't have to fight the next round!

These competitions would proceed to the quarter-finals, usually held at night under floodlights. We would sit around the ring and cheer for our classmates, Roman Colosseum-style. It was brutal, yet mandatory. After the matches, we'd head to the dining hall. Victors marched in with pride; others limped in with swollen eyes or puffed lips that made eating difficult. Dried blood at the corner of the mouth wasn't uncommon.

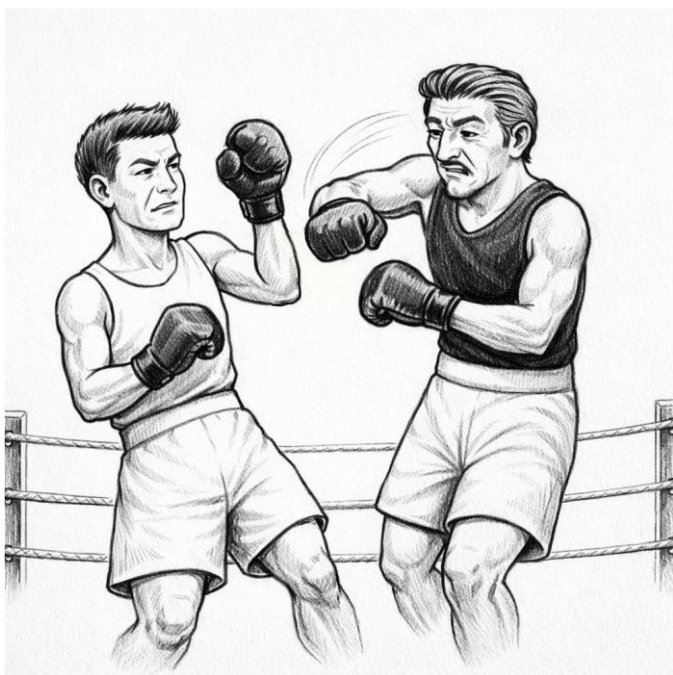


One evening, during a match, a senior collapsed, clutching his stomach in agony after a powerful punch. He had to be rushed

to the hospital. That incident left a deep scar in my mind. From that moment on, I could never truly accept boxing as a sport.

At the time, Cassius Clay had not yet transformed into Muhammad Ali. We knew him as the world's boxing king. Later, Ali was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, which eventually led to dementia, which medical science terms 'Punch Drunk Syndrome.' It's a tragic fate that can befall boxers after repeated head trauma.

And me? I remained a spectator. The matches continued. Some fell; others emerged champions, heads held high, chests puffed with pride. Sometimes I wonder — are they all doing fine today? Or are some suffering in silence with Parkinson's? May my doubts prove wrong. May they all live healthy, happy lives.



Art and Craft Class

Shortly after I joined Class V in Sainik School in July 1972, I was introduced to two new subjects that felt completely novel to me—Art and Wood Craft. Today, children from middle- and upper-class families often attend art schools as a matter of course. But in our childhood, such things were a luxury, almost a fantasy.

At the far end of the school building, two adjacent halls were reserved for these classes. That wing was the exclusive zone for Art and Wood Craft.

Our art teacher was Mr G.P. Goswami (possibly Gurupada Goswami). He had a dusky complexion, was a bit on the shorter side, and kept his jet-black hair neatly combed. He always wore a white half-sleeved shirt and matching full-length trousers—the standard uniform for our school teachers—polished black shoes, and carried a small notebook in his hand. A thick-capped black fountain pen, likely an expensive ‘President Pen’ of that era, always peeked from his shirt pocket.

The art room had rows of desks and chairs arranged in a semicircle. It wasn’t just a classroom; it resembled an art gallery. The walls were lined with student-made artworks—paintings in watercolour, oil, pencil sketches, and more. Only the best works were displayed, and we would look at them in

awe. Typically, half the class attended art while the other half was in craft class.

As for me, I was bad at both. Art, as I soon realised, was a subtle skill. Initially, I was hopeless. I recall one day when Goswami Sir placed a broken clay pot at the centre of the room and asked us to sketch it from the angle where we sat. I found the task impossible. My roommate, Routh—a born artist—bailed me out by drawing mine within seconds.

Another time, Sir told us to sketch a human figure. I froze again. He explained the proportions: a person's height should be roughly three and a half times the length of their own hand. He taught us how to use the pencil as a visual guide, how to apply perspective with the 'viewfinder' technique, and how to start with a scaled-down layout before moving on to a larger composition.

Gradually, I picked up the grammar of art, but talent cannot be forced. I simply couldn't become an artist. The very thought of art class filled me with dread, and I never really enjoyed it. By the time I reached Class VIII or IX, I happily bid farewell to it.

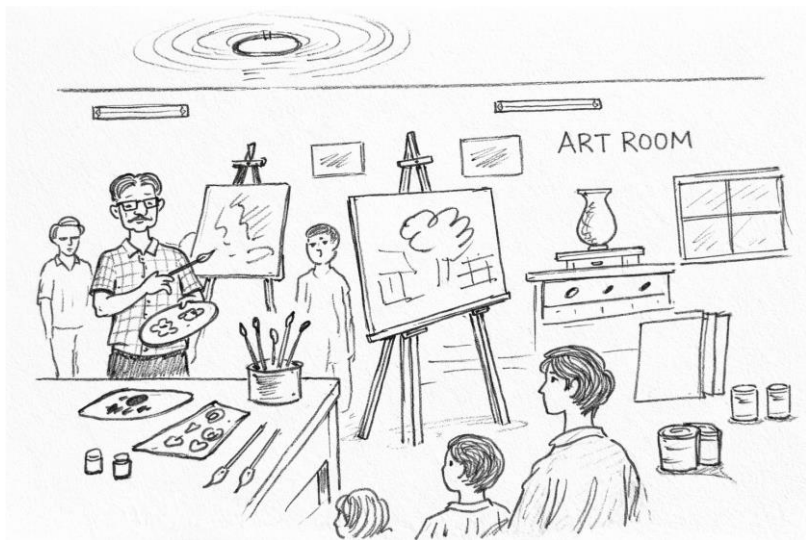
Yet, subconsciously, much of what Sir taught remained with me. It proved immensely helpful later during medical school when we had to draw diagrams in Anatomy, Pathology, Microbiology, and Surgery practicals. In those days, I remembered Goswami Sir fondly.

Several of my classmates were brilliant at art. I vividly recall the works of three in particular—Sankar Routh, Sukanta, and Rajesh Yadav. Rajesh did excellent pencil portraits. I remember his sketches of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath

Tagore, which earned him special attention from our teacher. Perhaps today, busy with life, he no longer paints.

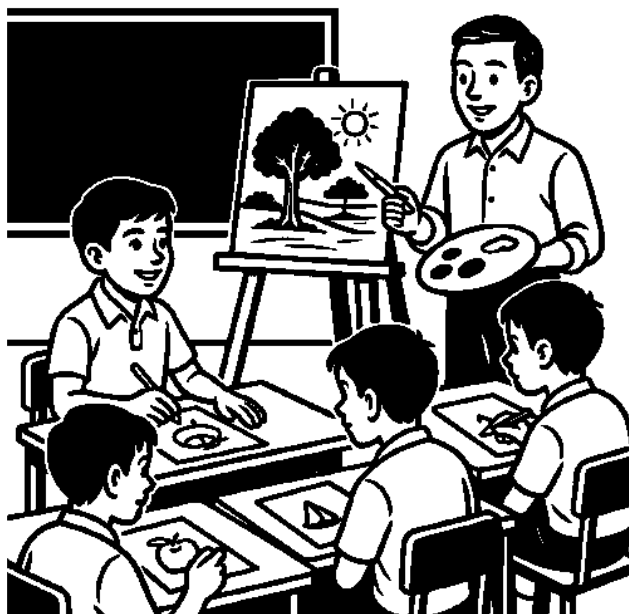
Sankar Routh, who was my roommate and housemate, was a natural. Even during regular classes, he would absent-mindedly fill his notebook with sketches. I used to admire his work silently while the teachers, unaware, assumed he was diligently taking notes. When I visited his home in Hyderabad years later, his living room walls were adorned with gorgeous oil paintings. Those were just a few of his countless creations — many of which he had gifted to others.

And then there was the eccentric genius of art, Sukanta — our '*Pagla Dashu*'. I didn't witness much of his work firsthand, but I distinctly remember a few postcard-sized watercolour paintings from our Class IX days. Strangely, I still possess two of them — one a portrait of Tagore, the other a playful watercolour of a monkey swinging from a tree. Dear readers, please don't read too much into the contrast — both simply appealed to me!



Sukanta's talent went beyond paper. His every act carried artistic flair – whether it was fashioning a belt from snakeskin, turning a giant turtle head from Digha into a cigarette ashtray, or making neckties out of paper. His creativity was unmatched. Later, he gained international acclaim for his unique collage style, exhibiting massive works in numerous art shows. I once had the fortune of visiting his *Telgaon* home near Pune, where I saw many of his original pieces. He remains deeply immersed in art, and we are all proud of him.

By the time we reached Class IX or X, school rules required us to choose between Art and Craft, just like we had to choose between Hindi and Bengali. I opted for Wood Craft – not out of interest or skill, but because it was the lesser evil for me! With physical strength, I could at least fake some productivity.



Now, let me talk about the Wood Craft class. It focused on carpentry. Our craft teacher was Mr Sutradhar – slightly

portly, with short, curly back-brushed hair and thinning sides. He usually wore his shirt untucked over his trousers and sported a black-belted watch on his left wrist. In winter, he wore a half-sweater or a brown blazer. A gentle man, he rarely scolded and was always ready to help.

In this class, we learned to take accurate measurements, memorise the names and parts of various tools, and perform basic woodworking. The tools we often used included:

- ☐ *Plane* – to smooth the wood,
- ☐ *Chisel* – to carve,
- ☐ *Mallet* – a wooden hammer to tap the chisel,
- ☐ *Saw* – to cut planks, and
- ☐ *Auger* – a drill-like tool for boring holes.

Even with sweat trickling down my back, I couldn't create anything worthwhile! We also had to draw these tools in our craft notebooks and label them – yet another excuse to sketch!

Some of my classmates were quite skilled – like Pradip Barua and Debashish Dutta. In fact, Debashish was nicknamed *Kastha* (wood)!

The craft room was huge, with another small room inside. Wooden planks and long tables were scattered everywhere, and many old student projects were stored at the back. The room often looked cluttered. Sometimes we worked in the corridor outside, bordered by a half-wall we could sit on or climb over. That spot also doubled as our 'milk break' (tiffin) area.

Today, carpentry has changed. Manual tools of our time have given way to electric machines. Plywood has replaced solid wood. Tasks that once took hours now take minutes. Yet

whenever I visit the school, I still make it a point to revisit those old art and craft rooms.

‘O dweller of the house, open your door, open it; the festival of swing (Dol) has begun’....



‘O Re Grihobashi...’ – Open Your Doors, It’s Holi!

From the balcony of my house, I can see the neighbours out in the streets, joyfully immersed in colours. Today is *Dol Purnima*, Holi. It’s a holiday for me, but I know well that I will spend the entire day lounging with a book in hand, far away from the mess of colours. With a cup of tea, I settled into my balcony seat and was suddenly transported back to the 1970s – to the grounds of Sainik School, Purulia.

Holi was always a holiday at school. After breakfast, each of us would be handed a measured packet of *abir* (*gulal*). No water balloons, no coloured water, no *pichkaris*. The school captain would blow a whistle, signalling the official start of Holi celebrations. Everything was conducted in an orderly, almost mechanical fashion.

We used to dig out the oldest, most tattered clothes we had – so that if the colour stains didn’t wash out, we could simply throw them away later.

Personally, I divide Holi into two eras – Pre-*Silsila* and Post-*Silsila*. Yes, that iconic romantic Hindi film *Silsila*. Before the film, Holi meant messy clothes, smudged faces, and timeless songs like "Saraa Raaraa...", "Aaj na chhodenge...", "Holi ke din...", or at least "Khol Dwaar Khol, Laagle Je Dol..."

But a few years after *Silsila*, the entire concept of Holi changed. Suddenly, clean white kurta-pyjamas or festive yellow and spring-coloured outfits became the norm. The throwing of muddy water and slush stopped. And unofficially, mild drinking gained social acceptance!

Anyway, in those adolescent days, we'd step out of the hostel with tiny packets of *abir*, tossing colours at each other as we walked across the playing field to the designated Holi ground.

That ground lay just beyond the main field, in a slight dip. It was a patch of barren land, surrounded by tall trees and small mounds. Even at ten in the morning, the *Falgun* sun wasn't too harsh — perfect conditions for a Holi gathering. Once we'd all assembled, our Principal, Headmaster, and Registrar would arrive, and the captain's whistle would pierce the air: "*Sit down! Baith jao!*" We'd sit in circles around a few chairs placed at the centre — the throne of honour for our dignitaries. By then, everyone's faces had turned unrecognisable under the layers of coloured dust. We hurled handfuls of colours in wild guesses, unsure who was who.

Then came a short cultural programme right there — some students and teachers would perform songs, recite poetry, or deliver *shayari* in Hindi. The performers were almost always the same — 'six of one and half a dozen of the other' - familiar faces with modest talents.

One of our math teachers, his face smeared in hues, would recite *shayari* and poetry with great emotion. At that age, none of it made any sense to us, yet we would clap and cheer, encouraging him further, knowing full well it would earn us another head-scratching couplet.

But there was another teacher who would sing folk tunes like '*Komola he nritya kore...*' — now *that* was enjoyable!

Amidst the performances, refreshments would arrive — cold drinks and a packet of snacks. That packet was our main attraction! Inside it, a cold *singara* (which we called a *samosa*) — yet, in the confines of hostel life, that single snack felt like nectar!

Once the programme ended, it was time to return — and to try removing the Holi colours from our bodies.

We would rush back to the hostel, scrambling for access to the limited water in the bathrooms. There was no guarantee how long the water would last. A quick scrub with soap and we would emerge from the bathroom into our rooms like war-weary soldiers returning from battle. That's when we'd see the others — the smart ones who had hidden inside the hostel all along to avoid the fray. They remained clean, untouched — a blank canvas!



Next came lunch in the dining hall — a slightly special menu for the day. After lunch, the entire campus sank into a lazy stupor. Everyone was exhausted and resting — and it was then that the Principal and Headmaster would begin their private party.

That part of the day always reminded me of *Aban Thakur's Kheerer Putul* — the courtyard of Goddess Shasthi, where everyone suddenly drifts into sleep.

It was also the perfect time to sneak off to town — a golden window for escape from school. I made good use of that opportunity many times. But that's a story for another day.



Our Teachers

We were fortunate to have many teachers at our Sainik School. Back then, during our school years, we did not fully understand the depth of their contribution. But once we stepped out into the outside world, we realised it at every turn in life.

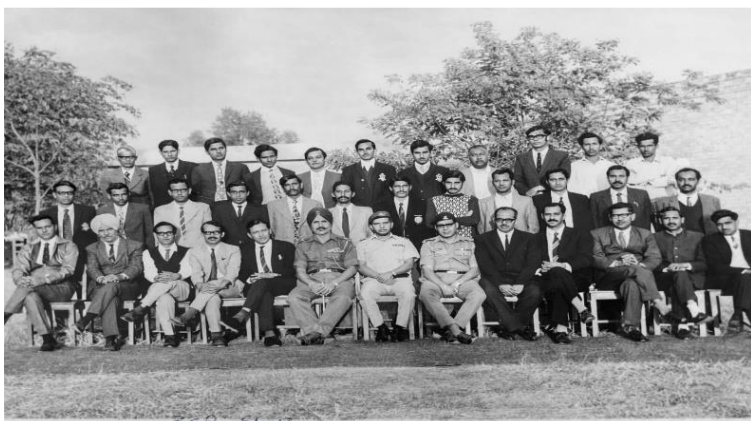
Memories of them come floating back—some faint, some vivid. They don't feel distant at all; rather, they seem fresh, almost recent. Is it really true that memories are always sweet?

In this limited space, it is impossible to speak of all our teachers. So, I have written only what I could gather by gently rummaging through memory.

In 1972, when we entered Class V, the first teacher we encountered was Mr B. K. Bose. Fair-complexioned, clean-shaven, with slightly curly hair brushed back and thinning at the forehead, he wore black-framed spectacles. He usually dressed in a white shirt and trousers, with the shirt always worn loose, never tucked in. There was a faint fragrance of perfume about him. He mostly taught English, and his habitual “followed, followed...” was a distinctive verbal tic. On the very first day, he assigned nicknames to everyone—*Battibabu*, *Kumantra*, *Chhola Kola Brahmin*, and so on. We may not have liked it much, but it certainly caused a lot of laughter.

Mr B. K. Bose knew every student inside out. He kept a watchful eye during evening prep classes and, as far as I remember, was the House Master of Patel House. He dined with us regularly in the dining hall and lived alone in his quarters. We had him as our teacher right up to Class Twelve. After leaving school, we lost touch. A few years ago, I heard that he had passed away.

We had two teachers with the same first name — Mr Pratul Dutta, who was middle-aged, and Mr Pratul Lahiri, much younger and a bachelor.



Mr Pratul Dutta taught Bengali. He was also my local guardian, as his wife, *Banani Mashi*, had once taught at Rampurhat Girls' School alongside my mother. Though he initially taught us Bengali, he later taught English as well. He spoke little, but when he did, his words were crisp and unembellished. Occasionally, he would scold us with a casual '*bandar*' (monkey). He was absent-minded, contemplative, and moved at a slow pace. His black hair was streaked with visible grey, and he wore thick black-framed glasses. He never wore a wristwatch, once remarking that he did not wish to become a slave to time. We hardly saw him during the game period,

and he would often arrive breathlessly at assembly. He never ate in the dining hall. His classes, however, were a delight – he spoke of things far beyond textbooks. Once a week, he would narrate stories, many of them of his own creation. We listened wide-eyed, devouring every word. He was an excellent theatre director; his English play '*The Sentinel*' won everyone's hearts and even went on to compete as a school production. The acting, stagecraft, and costumes were unforgettable.

Only later did we learn that he was deeply immersed in literature, regularly reading and writing for the Bengali '*Desh*' magazine in the 1970s. I still remember one piece – his Bengali translation of '*Daddy-Long-Legs*', which he titled *Baba Shri Lomba Charan*. Sunil Gangopadhyay once wrote about him in *Desh*. I even recall seeing eminent Bengali writers of that era gathering in his quarters – Sunil Gangopadhyay most clearly, though I'm unsure whether Shakti Chattopadhyay was among them.

Within a few years, Pratul Dutta Sir left Sainik School to teach at *Kalimpong* and later at St Paul's School in Kolkata, and we lost a teacher of extraordinary range. I met him again at the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the school. In his later years, he suffered from Parkinson's dementia and eventually passed away.

Mr Pratul Lahiri, sir, joined us in a higher class to teach Chemistry. Slim-built, with a longish face and a faint bluish shade on his cheeks from regular shaving, he had just graduated from university. He remained a bachelor throughout our school years until 1980. His ancestral home was probably in Berhampore-Kandi. He tried hard to appear serious, while we made equal efforts to crack jokes and make him smile. He avoided speaking any language other than

English, and we mischievously asked questions in Bengali just to hear him respond in it.

His teaching and notes, however, were excellent. He taught with great seriousness, writing continuously on the blackboard the moment he entered class. We secretly nicknamed him “Rajdhani Express.” It was he who made us truly appreciate Chemistry, for which I remain grateful even today. Sometimes, at our insistence, he would pause lessons and tell us stories—about fast bowler Larwood’s autobiography or the Manhattan Project during World War II. We listened spellbound. Years later, those stories came alive again in the film *Oppenheimer*.

He taught us Chemistry until Class Twelve, and I did quite well in the subject in my final exam. After leaving school in 1980, we lost touch. Wherever you are, sir, may you be well—please accept my respectful greetings.

Our Hindi teacher was Mr Shyamdeo Jha, or Mr S. D. Jha. With his large build, round face, and half-Hitler moustache, he looked imposing. Tall and slightly heavysset, he taught us in Class Seven. When he entered the classroom and commanded “*Chalo, baitho*,” we would fall silent in fear. His thick glasses never failed to catch our mischief. A well-aimed slap on the back was his signature discipline. Weak in Hindi myself, and with him speaking nothing else, those classes were nightmarish for me. I waited eagerly to reach Class Nine so I could drop Hindi for Bengali.

In Class Eleven, he became our class teacher and House Master of Tagore House. Strictly vegetarian—a Maithili Brahmin—he arrived punctually at the dining hall. Occasionally, he would recite Rabindranath’s poems in Hindi-accented pronunciation.

After we left school, he too faded from our lives, though his memory remains.



We had Mr B. L. Dutta—Balai Lal Dutta—right from the beginning till Class Twelve. We called him BLD. Tall, lean, dark-complexioned, with striking white teeth that showed when he smiled, he taught Mathematics. His black hair was brushed back, puffed slightly in front like a *singara*. He had studied in Ranchi, spoke fluent Hindi, and loved reciting *shayari*—especially during Holi. We would respond with enthusiastic “*wah, wah*” without fully understanding.

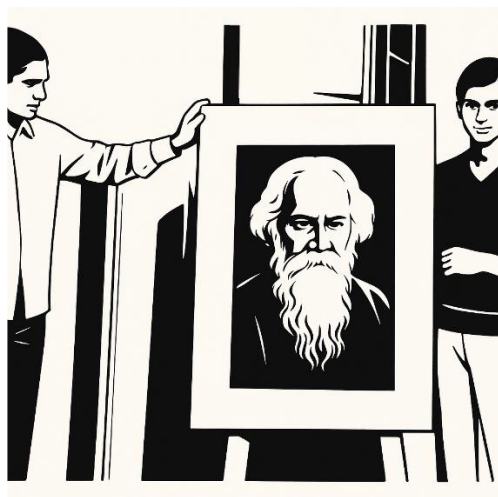
A master of mathematics, he wrote complex calculus effortlessly on the blackboard—helpful for toppers, but challenging for average students like me. He paid more attention to the brightest students, engaging them in high-level discussions, while we struggled to keep up. He was also keen on sports, playing volleyball and football.

Mr K. C. Biswas—Krishna Chandra Biswas sir—joined after we entered school. A native of Purulia, he knew the region well. Short, dark, curly-haired, and gentle by nature, he taught

Physics and was always ready to help. Initially a bachelor, he ate and played games with us. I still remember the annual TABC vaccinations—mandatory and painful. One classmate had a severe needle phobia and tried to flee. Biswas, sir, chased him as he jumped from chair to table, until he finally caught him. The whole class laughed until we rolled on the floor.

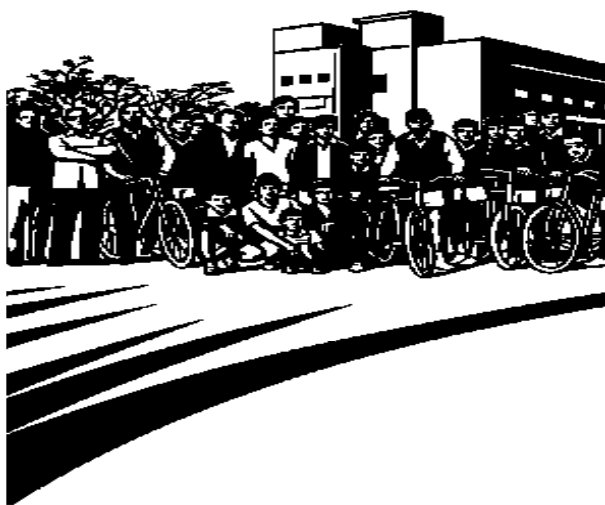
He arranged costumes and makeup for school dramas, even sourcing chandeliers for the stage—once favouring Tagore House over Patel House, to our amusement. In later years, he taught us Physics with great care.

We had two PT teachers: Mr G. B. Singh—Guru Bachan Singh Bajwa—and Mr Mitra, later known to us as Sukumar Mitra. Mr Singh, sir, arrived every morning with a whistle, dressed in white, with long hair tied with a cloth or turban, beard neatly twirled. Tireless and fit, he trained us relentlessly. His oft-repeated line – *“If your money is lost, nothing is lost, if your health is lost, something is lost, but if your character is lost, everything is lost...”* – once amused us, but today its meaning rings true.

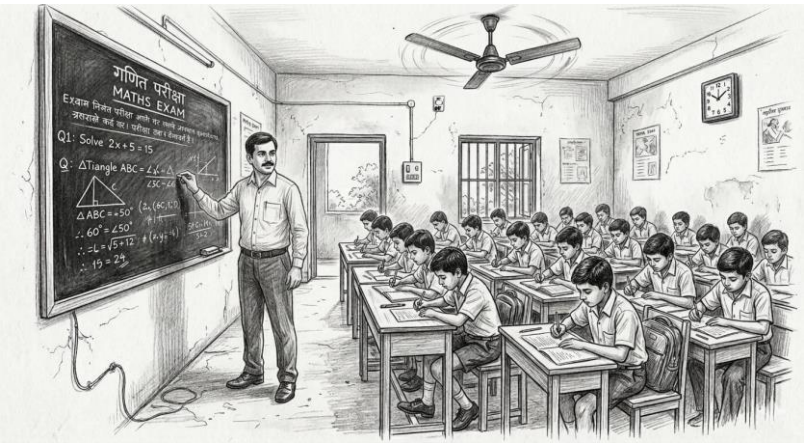


Mr Mitra, sir, was huge, loud-voiced, and fearsome. He punished lateness severely, even with slaps. Though he rarely ran, he monitored us from a distance, except during athletics meets. Once, he caught a senior who had skipped school to watch a movie, dragged him back on his scooter, and reported him, though lack of proof saved the boy.

Our art teacher was Mr G. P. Goswami, sir—Guruprasad Goswami—short, dusky, serious, and deeply artistic. He nurtured real talent, and several of his students later became professional artists. He left when we were in Class Nine.



Craft classes were run by Mr S. C. Sutradhar—cheerful, fatherly, patient. He taught us woodworking with care, never scolding, always smiling. We had him until we passed out in 1980. I still remember his brown coat and sleeveless sweater during winter classes.



Our Beloved School Teachers

During the eight long years of our school life (1972–1980), we had the fortune of being taught and guided by many teachers. Since Sainik School was a residential institution, most of the teachers were not confined to classrooms alone. They would eat with us, play with us, accompany us on picnics, and stand by us in times of trouble. Although their strict rules and discipline were not always to our liking back then, we later realised how deeply they had etched themselves into our subconscious.

Today, as a teacher myself in a medical college, teaching medicine, I often feel that many of those schoolteachers still remain my role models.

I first saw **Mr Sarkar** on the very first day of our Geography class in Class VI. He walked into the room, picked up a piece of chalk, and drew a perfect circle on the blackboard in one smooth stroke. Then he shaped it into a hemisphere and began his lesson on the geography of the Earth.

He spoke in a clear and elegant style of English, with his own unique rhythm. His serious demeanour added a distinct gravity to the class.

He always wore the prescribed white shirt and trousers of the school. He had neatly trimmed sideburns, black-rimmed glasses that reflected a pale bluish tinge, and a no-nonsense

aura. Whenever he came to class, we would instinctively straighten up. If he noticed someone daydreaming or dozing off, he would toss a chalk piece straight at the target—and never miss. Later, we came to know he was an excellent sportsperson and had even played *Ranji Trophy* cricket in his youth. On Sundays, when matches were held between students and teachers, everyone eagerly waited to see Mr Sarkar in action. He also played the mouth organ beautifully.

Sadly, by the time we reached Class Eight, he left our school and joined La Martiniere School in Kolkata. We were heartbroken to lose such an all-rounder teacher. Years later, we met again at a reunion—but by then, we had all grown older, and our perspective had matured.

From the very first day at school, there was one teacher whom we saw both day and night—**Mr. T.P. Das**, whose full name was *Tarapada Das*.

He had a reddish fair complexion, and when he got angry, his entire face would flush red. He had a prominent bald patch on the crown, with neatly cropped black hair around the sides, and a sharp moustache under his nose.

In the mornings, he would be out with us doing PT in long, baggy half-pants. And in the afternoons, he would inevitably be spotted at the games field. While he didn't play actively, he kept a close watch on all activities.

In Class Six, Mr T.P. Das sir taught us Hindi, which, for me, was a completely new language. It was difficult at first, but it was Sir who helped me pick up writing and understand Hindi.

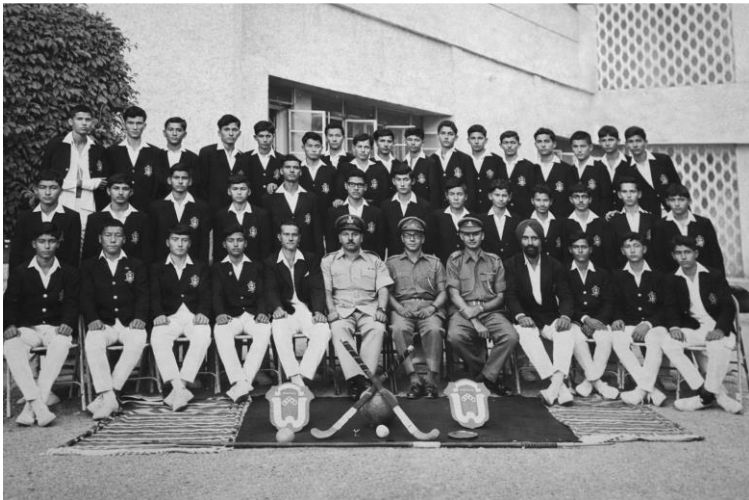
Though his primary subject was Social Studies, he would take classes in History, Geography, English, and even Mathematics

whenever needed. Whenever a teacher went on leave, Mr Das would step in without hesitation.

One of his quirks was to write “DLFGH” on the blackboard and ask us its meaning. We had no clue the first time. He then explained – *Days Left For Going Home*.

He would write down the number of days left for the vacation beside it, and reduced it by one every passing day. For homesick students in Classes Five and Six, this was both amusing and motivating.

Another line he often used was: “*Chullu bhar paani mein doob maro!*” (Go drown yourself in a bowl of water!). We didn’t understand the expression at first, but once we did, it became a source of great laughter. Later, we learnt that Mr Das was the Assistant Headmaster of our school. He lived alone in a small yellow one-storied staff quarter right in front of our hostel. He was deeply and selflessly devoted to the school from dawn till night.



After we left school in 1980, we heard that he was honoured with the **National Award for Teachers**, personally presented by the President of India. That day, we all felt a surge of pride “We were his students.”

Then there was **Mr D.K. Banerjee, sir** — a fair-complexioned, sharp-looking teacher with jet-black hair and a shining bald patch at the centre. His attire was always impeccable, and his black shoes shone like mirrors. He was jovial, approachable, and had the remarkable ability to remember students by name. Fluent in English, Bengali, and Hindi, he spoke all three with equal ease. For a few years, he was the Housemaster of *Tagore House*. During those days, he helped students write their speeches for elocution competitions. What made it delightful was how humorous his speech ideas were.

Now, looking back, I realise he possessed a truly “out-of-the-box” thinking. He was present not just in classrooms but also on the parade grounds and sports fields. He taught us Science and Physics, and though we enjoyed his classes, we were also cautious — because if we misbehaved during the evening study prep, we would be pulled up.

In NCC, he wore a white half-pant and shirt—the Navy uniform, as we later came to know. It was from him that we first learnt that the salutes in the Army, Navy, and Air Force are all different. If my memory serves me right, when we were in Class Ten, he too left our school to join La Martiniere School in Kolkata.

Then there was **Mr D.K. Sinha**, who was perhaps one of the most disciplined teachers associated with the school. He was slightly short in height, his hair faintly grey in colour, parted and combed to cover his bald spot, and always wore a wristwatch. He rarely smiled and often delivered sermons or

moral lessons in class. He was our history teacher and the Housemaster of *Tilak House*. Punctual to the minute and always dressed neatly, he was also the NCC in charge and took great interest in parade drills.

One of his famous lines during a parade was – “*Don’t stand like an orangutan!*”

The image of an orangutan at the zoo would flash before our eyes, and we’d try to measure our own resemblance!

Mr D.K. Sinha, sir, also received the **President’s National Award for Teachers**.

We had heard his hometown was in Jalpaiguri, North Bengal, which is why he would stay back at school during Durga Puja holidays, and escort students home during the summer and winter breaks. I still remember his Holi favourite – “*Kamla hey nritya kare...*” sung in that special voice of his.

There were many more teachers who left a permanent mark on our hearts.

Naming them all here would take up too much space. But the few who are etched most deeply in memory, I simply could not leave out.

One such unforgettable teacher was **Mr S.K. Kanungo**, our Mathematics teacher. Had it not been for him, I might never have learned Maths properly. He was a master teacher, especially for average students like us. Algebra, Logarithms, Geometry, Trigonometry, Calculus—he could make the most difficult concepts feel like water flowing through fingers. It was solely because of him that I secured ‘Letter Marks’ in both Class 10 and 12. Mr Kanungo, sir, loved eating fish—something all students knew.

So, naturally, mischief followed. Some would draw a fish on the blackboard before his class, which made him so annoyed he wouldn't teach that day. For some, this became a trick to skip Maths classes. But the fun didn't last long. Realising the value of his teaching, we soon apologised and returned to being dutiful students.



He also sang beautifully and played the harmonium. As we grew older, he even taught us a few songs which we used to sing during the school assembly – songs like:

“Anandaloke...”

“Eto din je boshe chilam poth cheye...”

Even today, whenever I hear those melodies, I'm transported back in time—and with it, the memory of **Kanungo Sir** resurfaces vividly.

Our School Library

Our Sainik School library was tucked away at the far end of the school building. The school itself was shaped like a quadrangle, and the library occupied one whole side of that square. As you entered the library, a few steps led down to a small open space with two or three long desks stacked with daily English newspapers for students to read. All the newspapers were in English.

On the floor nearby sat a huge bottle of "Sulekha Ink" – kept for refilling our fountain pens. Ballpoint pens hadn't caught on back then, so fountain pens were our only option. Much like filling petrol in a car, one had to refill the pen with ink at the right time. Refilling ink was a messy affair – almost a ritual. It usually ended with our fingers, palms, and even elbows stained blue. Our class monitor would fetch ink from the library in a small inkwell for everyone. We would fill our pens from it. Only blue ink was allowed – other colours were strictly forbidden. There was a plastic dropper meant for filling, but it rarely lasted long. Eventually, we just poured ink straight from the inkwell into the pen.

Beyond that corridor lay the main library – a vast hall lined with four or five rows of open iron bookshelves, stacked with books of all kinds. Some shelves housed textbooks, others storybooks, and yet others had general knowledge books. Most of the books were in English.

In the middle of this big hall were several long tables and chairs arranged for reading. On these tables were neatly laid out magazines and periodicals—*Competition Master*, *Career Guide*, *Sunday*, *Cine Blitz*, *Reader's Digest*, *Dharmyug* (Hindi), and the Bengali magazine *Desh*, among others, I can't quite recall. A few English and Hindi newspapers were also available. During library periods or free periods, we would sit and flip through them.

As far as I remember, on the southern side of the hall were two medium-sized rooms. The first was the library office, although it was crammed with bookshelves. Inside the second room were Godrej cupboards, always locked, containing premium collections—like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, colourful atlases, and one fascinating thing: an audio phone system designed to teach English the correct Oxford way. But it needed the librarian's permission to operate. Once turned on, it taught English in a perfect British accent. Many students would crowd around to listen. I, too, satisfied my curiosity by listening, though I never tried to learn seriously. Had I done so back then, perhaps today I could hold a conversation with Shashi Tharoor!

There was just one library period per week for each class, which, honestly, felt too short. I loved that library. So many types of books and magazines from all over—it was easy to lose track of time. Among all that the library offered, the Bengali section was the most alluring for me. There were so many tempting Bengali books—but sadly, they were not available for issue. We were required to check out only English books. Yet, it was there I first came across *Aam Aatir Bhepu*, *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajita*, *Dracula*, *Sharadindu Omnibus*, *Kiriti Omnibus* by Nihar Ranjan Gupta, *Asami Hajir* by Bimal Mitra—

and these fed my addiction to reading. My fascination with detective fiction began right there. Before joining the school, the only detective stories I knew were pulp-style tales from *Swapankumar*.

We were required to borrow and read an English book every week. So, I would dutifully check one out, and then gradually make my way through it. If needed, I would consult a dictionary. Over time, I ended up reading quite a few English books. I had started with Enid Blyton—her stories were written in simple language and filled with adventure. In those adolescent years, those tales felt incredibly romantic and thrilling.

There was a time I even dreamt of becoming a librarian—so I could spend all day surrounded by stories, reading to my heart’s content.

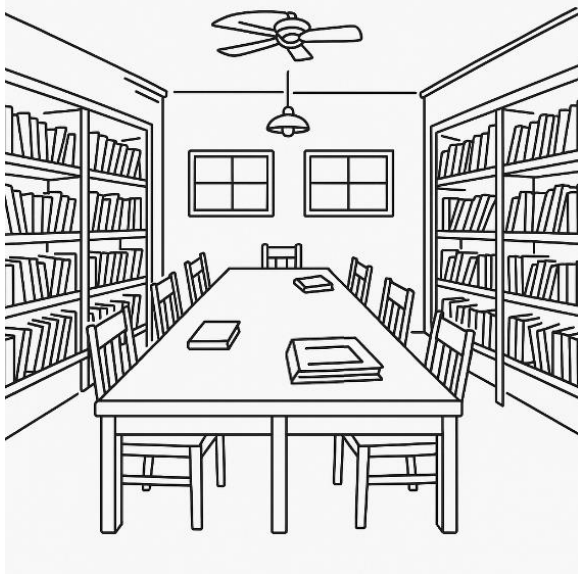
Once, in Class V, I got hold of a fat Bengali storybook (I don't remember who gave it to me) and started reading it secretly during our evening prep session. I had just begun when our librarian swooped in from behind and snatched it from my hands. He scolded me furiously and said, “You’re not old enough to read this book yet.” And just like that, he walked away with it. The book was ‘*Adarsha Hindu Hotel*’.

From the time I joined Class V, our librarian was Mr N.C. Roy—Nirmal Chandra Roy. He left such an impression on me that I don’t even remember who replaced him.

Mr Roy was fair-skinned, clean-shaven, always seen with thick-rimmed, high-powered black spectacles. I never saw him without those glasses. His half-shirt would hang loose over his trousers, never tucked in. He typically wore brown leather sandals. He was short in stature, with a constantly hanging

Charminar cigarette between his lips (yes, back then, teachers smoked freely in the corridors), and he coughed incessantly. Just hearing his dry cough was enough to know that Mr Roy was nearby. To us kids, he looked exactly like Rahul Dev Barman. Behind his back, we even called him R.D. Barman! Occasionally, we'd even spot him playing cricket on the field.

He maintained strict vigilance in the library. His eyes were everywhere—watching who was reading what, who was handling which book. He single-handedly maintained all records—who issued which book, and who returned what. There were even a few boys who tried to steal books, so he had to keep an eye on that too.



All the exercise books needed for academic work—specific to each class and subject—were issued from the library. Class monitors would submit requests to the class teacher, who would pass it on to the librarian, and soon we'd receive bundles of '*Banga Lipi*' or '*Lipika*' notebooks. Some were ruled,

others blank—mainly for Maths. These notebooks came in half-size and full-length versions. The name '*Banga Lipi*' brings back a flood of memories. I'm sure, just reading this, many of you are already transported back to your old classroom days. Issuing these notebooks properly was also part of the librarian's job.

When I was in Class X, we had a special Teacher's Day event on September 5. It was decided that students would act as teachers up to the milk break. Each student would teach a class according to their subject of strength. That day, I was chosen to be the librarian—and I was absolutely delighted! I spent a few hours proudly playing the role and thoroughly enjoyed it.



Even today, I can vividly picture that enormous library. It was from there that I learnt so much, and it was Mr N.C. Roy, who first encouraged me to read books beyond the syllabus. Otherwise, why would I still remember that library and its librarian even after five decades?

Kolkata Parade

Republic Day on the 26th of January was a grand affair in our school. Preparations for the parade would begin weeks in advance. A selected group of boys was chosen to go to Delhi to march in front of the President of India. The senior boys were usually sent to Kolkata to parade before the Governor of West Bengal. There, they would represent our Sainik School with pride. When we were in Class 10, we got the opportunity to march in the Kolkata Republic Day Parade. In fact, we had the chance to go twice—once in Class X and again in Class XI.

Before leaving, each of us would be issued a large rucksack from the NCC office—sturdy enough to hold all our camp essentials. With those on our backs, we would board the night train from Purulia to Howrah, accompanied by a teacher-in-charge. As school representatives, it was mandatory to wear our khaki NCC uniforms during the train journey. We would travel with great excitement, the joy of a night train ride to Kolkata lighting up our adolescent spirits.

Being a small-town boy, I had never been to Kolkata before. To me, it was a dream city. And going there with friends during our teenage years made it all the more thrilling. We would be taken there about a week before the main event and housed near Fort William in an army barracks. All of us stayed together in the dormitory, sharing the same space, routines, and food. Every morning, breakfast was served in white

enamel plates — four puris with potato curry, and a big enamel mug brimming with hot tea. In the chill of January, that hot tea felt like heaven. After breakfast, we would practice marching on Red Road, with the Victoria Memorial glimmering in the distance. Boys from other schools and colleges joined us, and though we covered quite a stretch, we never felt tired.

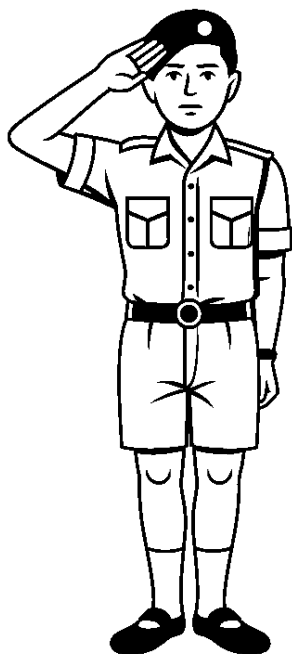


Our drills would end near the Maidan, from where we could catch glimpses of the Eden Gardens and *Akashvani Bhawan*. After the morning sessions, around ten or eleven, we were given a free pass — no restrictions, no one to answer to, and the city was ours to explore.

We were on the cusp of youth — brimming with energy, curiosity overflowing. We roamed Kolkata endlessly, especially around Esplanade. We watched films in all the theatres there, sometimes catching three shows in a single day. That's when we learned about matinee and night show timings: the first show from 3 to 6 PM, the second from 6:15 to 9:15 PM, and the last one from 9:30 until midnight. We'd hop from hall to hall, learning the names and show schedules of

every theatre around Esplanade. That whole area became our kingdom—for window shopping, street food, and carefree wandering. We even learned that the price of a plate of *phuchka* (*golgappa*) varied between Esplanade and the Victoria Memorial area.

Sitting in Victoria Memorial Park in the evening, we would marvel at the world around us, feeling strangely incomplete. It seemed like staying in a boys' residential school had left us missing out on so many things in life.



In those days, adult films were strictly off-limits to anyone under eighteen. Though none of us had officially reached that age, mentally we felt quite grown-up. Temptation took over one day, and we queued up at New Empire to watch '*That Man's Bolt*', an adult movie. But we were turned away for

being too young—there were no ID cards back then, just judgments based on facial hair and body language. One of our friends tried to pull off a more mature look by holding a cigarette at the entrance. He tossed it aside confidently and strode in with his ticket, pulling off the act convincingly. Back then, smoking inside the theatre was still tolerated—if done discreetly.

We also got to watch football matches in Kolkata and even peeped into the Race Course to catch a glimpse of horse racing. One day, while wandering around, we found ourselves in a red-light area. The heavily made-up women we saw there made it quite evident. That was our accidental introduction to Kolkata's nightlife. Just a few days in the city and we felt like we had aged by years.

During the parade rehearsals, there was a girls' school group practising nearby. We'd be marching, but our adolescent minds were brimming with excitement. Some would quietly weave dreams about a pretty face they saw, while others would return to the barracks with a heavy heart, consumed by teenage longing. Some even tried to grab attention with silly antics. Looking back, it's both embarrassing and funny—classic signs of youth and immaturity.

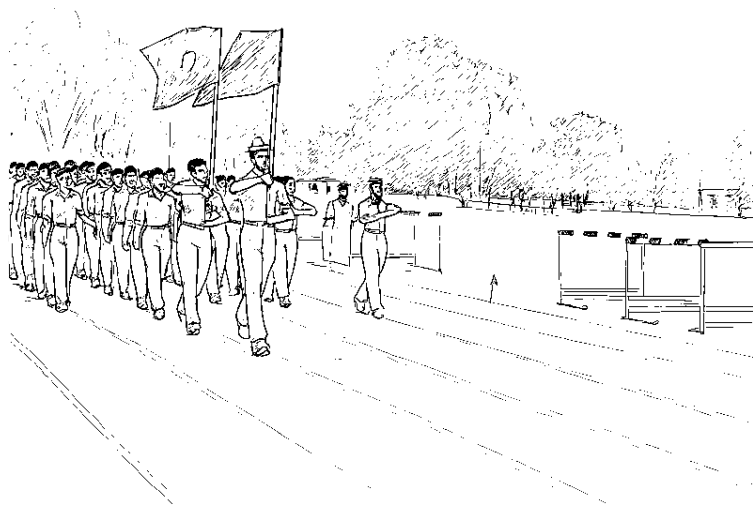
On the morning of January 26, we dressed in crisp, ironed khaki shirts and pants, navy blue sweaters, black caps adorned with what looked like a rooster's plume—probably called 'hackles. Our black shoes were polished so well you could see your reflection in them. We wore blue stockings pulled up to just below the knees. Everyone was eager for the final parade.

Red Road was cordoned off with bamboo barricades to control the enthusiastic crowds. Many of our friends' families were among the spectators. Seeing them cheered us on, and we

marched with extra vigour. Each wing of the armed forces was represented in the parade, accompanied by armoured vehicles and theme-based tableaux.

We marched proudly—left, right, left, right—towards the main stage, where the Honourable Governor, Chief Minister, and other dignitaries stood. As our platoon neared the dais, our captain would shout, “Eyes right!” and we would snap our heads to the right, trying to spot the Governor amidst the sea of decorated officials. Often, we couldn’t even identify who he was—but the excitement was unmatched.

That 26th January morning always felt special, but the joy was tinged with sadness. By night, we had to board the train back to Purulia. After a week filled with fun, freedom, and adventure, the thought of returning to our regimented hostel life dampened our spirits. Still, we carried back countless sweet memories—etched forever in our hearts.



Our Gopal da

Some people have a kind of face that makes it impossible to tell their age. Our *Gopal da* was one of those people. He was slightly built, almost frail, fair-skinned, and without the faintest trace of a beard or moustache. His jet-black hair was always combed back neatly with a side parting. Most of the time, he wore crisp, spotless white shirts and trousers. His shirt would usually hang loosely outside his trousers. The sleeves of his full-sleeve shirt would be casually rolled up just enough to reveal a small black-belted wristwatch peeking out from his wrist. Occasionally, he would turn up in a khaki shirt and pants. *Gopal da* worked silently and seriously in our school's small hospital. He was the one we turned to for all our health issues and medical curiosities. We didn't really know what exactly his job was — nor did we care to find out.

A part-time doctor used to visit our hospital every alternate day, usually on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, arriving in a cream-coloured Ambassador car. He would be there from 2 PM to 4 PM, attending to patients and then handing over instructions to *Gopal da* and the pharmacist before leaving. The rest of the time, it was up to them to handle the outpatient department, the inpatients, and any emergencies.

As soon as the doctor arrived, he would sit on his chair and call out, "*Gopal!*" Meanwhile, we would be lined up in the corridor, waiting for our turn. We would enter one by one, and

he would jot down prescriptions on small slips of paper after noting our names in a big register. We would then show the slip to *Gopal da*, who would dispense the necessary medicines from the dispensary. Most cases were routine—fever, dysentery, cuts and scrapes. If someone got hurt during sports or twisted an ankle, it was *Gopal da* who would be summoned to clean and dress the wound. We later found out that his official designation was that of a "Dresser".

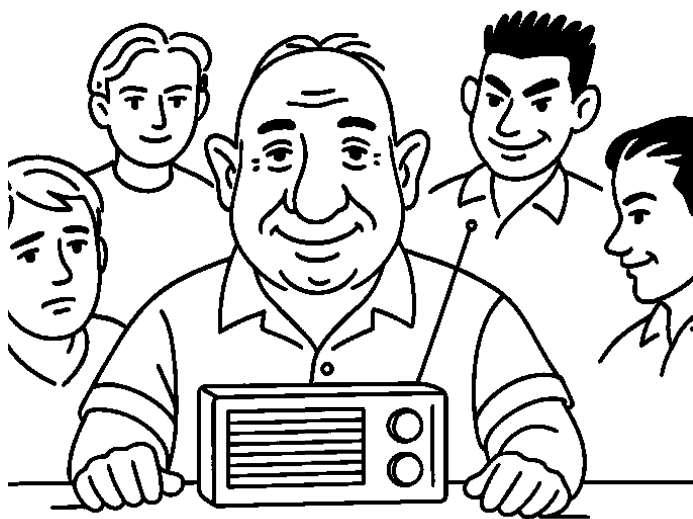
Three types of patients usually went to the school hospital. First, those who were genuinely unwell. Second, those with minor ailments who exaggerated them in the hope of being admitted for a few days of rest and better food. And third, those with slight foot injuries hoping to secure an EP—"Excuse PT"—a certificate that exempted them from morning physical training sessions. As long as the doctor mentioned the number of days on paper, PT was officially off the hook.

Our pharmacist was a short, dark, chubby gentleman with a perfectly bowl-cut (*bati chat*) hairstyle. No one knew his real name—we just called him "Pharma," and behind his back, "Motu". He lived alone in a small room inside the hospital premises and would walk to the dining hall for all three meals each day, taking a stroll afterwards before returning. The moment we saw him walking towards the dining hall, we knew it was mealtime. Although he was the pharmacist, everyone preferred to get their injections from *Gopal da*.

Gopal da lived alone in the staff quarters, a little away from the main campus. By the time we reached higher classes and adolescence began to dawn, we were obsessed with music. In the 1970s, the highlight of Wednesday nights was the "*Binaca Geetmala*," hosted by the velvety-voiced Ameen Sayani. But there was no way to listen to it. Radios weren't allowed in the

hostel, and we couldn't afford one either. If we ever heard music drifting from afar, we would cup our ears to catch a note or two.

Then came the whisper that if we went to *Gopal da's* house on Wednesday evenings, we could actually listen to *Binaca Geetmala*. But that would mean skipping our evening study period – "prep" – sneaking out of the classroom, and after the programme ended at 8:30, slipping quietly into the dining hall for dinner. And that's exactly what we did.



A handful of us would sneak over to *Gopal da's* place every Wednesday just to listen to that radio programme. Those little adventures remain unforgettable. Over the years, I've listened to *Binaca Geetmala* many times after leaving school, but it never sounded quite as sweet again. Back then, it felt like a stolen romance – secret, thrilling, and delicious.

"The superior walks confidently with the inferior, but those of average merit keep their distance."

"Main kya karu Ram, mujhe buddha mil gaya..."

That catchy line from an old Hindi song was being sung playfully by one of my roommates on the very next day of our admission to Sainik School. We were the same age. The song was familiar—though I hadn't understood its meaning in childhood, I would often dance to it, and the grown-ups at home would find it hugely entertaining.

Hearing the song, I walked over and asked, "Hey, what's your name? Where are you from?"

"Hazaribagh," he replied.

I quipped, "I've heard of 'Hazarduari,' but not 'Hazaribagh.'"

He said, "My name is Alope Roy. You must've heard the title 'Roy'—like Satyajit Roy."

That made me chuckle, and I instantly took a liking to him.

Alope had a longish face, and his unruly hair often curled in the opposite direction, especially near the roots, making his hairstyle quite noticeable. But it was his eyes—sharp and expressive—that drew people in. That was my first encounter with Alope.

Alope remained my roommate throughout school life—a friend through thick and thin. He introduced me to many things, serving as my informal mentor in more ways than one. He was blunt and outspoken, while I was quiet and shy. He was argumentative, always full of logic, and had an infectious optimism. Above all, he had a unique ability to encourage and motivate others. Despite being poles apart in personality, we

stuck together, thanks to the chemistry I still can't fully explain.

His only flaw? He never studied. He would spend the whole year avoiding books, and just before exams, gather a bunch of weaker students and "teach" them. In the process, he'd grasp the material himself and still manage to pass—with his scholarship intact!

Aloke was a brilliant sportsperson. Initially, he played as a left-out in football and later shifted to left-in. He was equally good at cricket. In fact, he was utterly devoted to sports. I was the exact opposite—sports felt like punishment. But since it was compulsory, I had to play.

One day, in Class VI, Aloke asked me, "Have you heard of Gary Sobers? Or Don Bradman? Do you know his batting average?"

I knew nothing. I just stared at him, baffled.

It must've been 1973. One Sunday evening, Aloke, Routh, and I were lounging outside Tagore House's D-shaped lobby. There were no prep classes on Sundays, and dinner was still some time away. As we chatted, we suddenly noticed a luminous disc far on the horizon, glowing radiantly.

"What is that?" we all wondered, mesmerised.

The three of us began walking towards it, enchanted. The closer we moved, the farther it seemed. Eventually, we reached the school's main gate—still clueless. I timidly suggested it might be the full moon, but lacked the conviction to persuade them.

Just then, a senior caught us wandering and interrogated us. After hearing our story, he laughed, "Never seen the full moon

before? You'll have to go on a moon mission to catch it. What did you learn in science today?"

Aloke shouted, "Solid, liquid, gas!"

The senior chuckled, "Then you're solid. He (pointing at me) is liquid, and Routh is gas." We burst into laughter, the moment instantly lightened.

Years later, I feel that remark carried a double meaning. But one thing was clear: all three of us shared a common love for beauty and wonder. That childish mission to "catch the moon" remained etched in memory.

Aloke often quoted a line, "The noble walks freely with the humble; the moderate one stays away." That line stuck with me. As an average middling student, I took it to heart. Aloke, being 'noble,' passed even while hanging out with us 'humble' folks. I found the saying so impactful that I even passed it on to my kids as a guiding philosophy.

Aloke had a deep love for Bengali literature. His memory was razor-sharp—he could recite Tagore and Nazrul with ease, captivating us with lines like:

"Jatir name bajjati sob, jat jaliat khelchhe juya..."

or

"Oi uthhechhe pagli mayer damal chele Kamal bhai..."

These verses first reached my ears through him.

He also recited Sukumar Ray's verses beautifully, drawing me into the world of Bengali nonsense poetry.

We often sat together in class and read the same storybook—me reading from one page, he from the other—racing to finish first. We were just stepping into adolescence, and love stories had started to tickle the imagination.

One summer break, Alope returned to school and said, “I started reading this romantic serial in the monthly ‘*Amrit*’ magazine at home. Had to leave midway, just when it was getting exciting.”

He then narrated the entire plot with such vivid detail that we were transported to Dooars’ tea gardens and Assam’s rain-washed hills. That was my first real taste of romanticism.

Alope was a master storyteller, with a flair that few possess. People with such talent naturally attract others, and many even become professional orators.

After hearing just a part of that story, we searched for the remaining issues. We managed to find a few, but never got to finish them. Maybe that’s why it stayed in our minds for so long—psychologists say incompleteness breeds memory. I finally got hold of the full novel decades later. Though I enjoyed it, it didn’t recreate the magic of our youth.

Alope also had a wonderful singing voice and was a natural actor. He always performed at school functions, fearlessly taking the stage. I remember him stealing the show in the inter-house drama ‘*Marich Sangbad*.’ I had a small role too. Alope was an all-rounder—sports, music, drama—except academics, which he purposely neglected. Had he taken studies seriously, who knows how life might have turned out?

Alope was carefree, chaotic, and adventurous. He never kept track of his belongings. Once, after a vacation, he brought back several small bottles of homoeopathic medicine, possibly intended for his father. But during our free time, he distributed them among us like candy—and we popped them joyfully! Back then, it felt like heaven. Today, I wouldn’t touch even one without reason.

His first big adventure was probably sneaking out in Class 8 to catch a movie in town—and getting caught! He received a good thrashing from the seniors but returned beaming, proudly narrating the movie's plot. He was a hero in our eyes.

He continued to excel in sports, while I remained a spectator and listener. Our Saturday night chats often lasted till dawn. Soon came our secret movie outings and Rafi Nights in town—a story I've shared earlier.



Aloke was a die-hard Mohun Bagan fan, while I supported East Bengal. Debates were frequent, and he usually won. He was also a staunch Rajesh Khanna fan and clashed with Amitabh Bachchan loyalists. Now I see it was all youthful “time pass.”

By Class 11, trouble hit. Aloke stuck to his old ways—avoiding studies—and failed. When school resumed after the summer

break, we heard he wouldn't return. It felt like losing a part of myself.

A few days later, Alope came back with his father to collect his belongings. We all pleaded with the headmaster. The newly appointed Principal, Wing Commander Tandon, reviewed his marks. "He's failed in Chemistry," he noted.

The Chemistry teacher, Lahiri Sir, revealed, "He didn't submit his practical file. How can I give marks?"

The Principal, in a surprising move, allowed Alope to resubmit the practical. We quickly created a new one and submitted it.

Later, we learnt the principal had made Alope promise he would crack the NDA exam, or he'd be permanently expelled.

That stunned me. NDA? It was nearly impossible. Top students often failed. How could Alope do it?

But Alope, true to his style, stayed unfazed. I, on the other hand, worried sick.

When the UPSC exams came, I failed. But Alope passed and cleared the SSB interview too. He joined the NDA on time, and I saluted him in awe. He had kept his word. He made our school proud.

Soon, life took us on our own journeys. Alope faded into memory, but I felt his absence. We met again—by sheer chance—at Delhi's Palam Airport. He was now a Wing Commander, posted there. I had just become a psychiatrist, heading to the UK for an interview.

He hosted me at his place and even dropped me at the airport at dawn.

That meeting rekindled our bond. Alope hadn't changed a bit — still the same carefree soul.



Our last meeting was just before his retirement, when he was Air Commodore in Allahabad. I visited with my family. The royal hospitality he extended was unforgettable.

Despite all his success, he was still our same old Alope.

Our Friend Pradeep Barua

In every class, there's always that one friend everyone remembers—not for being a topper, but for being delightfully mischievous. In our Sainik School class, that friend was someone with the surname *Barua*. On first hearing it, we assumed he was Assamese. But later, his own admission cleared the confusion. Now I know—those with the surname 'Barua' in Bengal are generally Bengali Buddhists from Chittagong. They are followers of the Buddhist faith.

Our very own *Pradeep Barua* was unusually mature for his age—an *early bloomer*, if you will. He had a strong, grown-up build and looked older than the rest of us, but had the heart of a child. By the time he was in Class 8, his upper lip already bore signs of a moustache and the beginnings of a patchy beard like young shoots in a paddy field. He had this peculiar habit of plucking at his facial hair as if it were some subconscious attempt to hide his maturity behind a veil of childishness.

He had other idiosyncrasies, too. Whenever he spoke, he would thump his left foot on the ground two or three times, absent-mindedly. He was also deeply superstitious and followed all sorts of rituals with an almost comical seriousness.

He was the first in our class to own a wristwatch—a shiny Seiko. We would eye it with concealed envy and admiration. Owning a Seiko in 1974 was a big deal. Of course, we pestered

him constantly for the time, and he always obliged with a smile.

Academics weren't his strength, but he was a natural at sports. On the football field, he played stopper. And when it came to *arm wrestling*—we called it *panja*—he was unbeatable. Every tiffin break saw him take on challengers one after another. There was another popular game too: one person would hold their palm upright on the desk while another struck it with a loud slap, chanting, "*Rosh, Kosh, Singara, Bulbuli...*" Our palms would turn red, but Pradeep, built like a mini-tank, would just laugh it off and keep playing.

Back then, quiz competitions were a new trend. We had a fat quiz book we'd use during free periods if a teacher was absent. Pradeep would become the quiz master, dividing us into three desk-row teams. There were no prizes, yet we'd sit eagerly to participate, captivated by the fun and challenge.

Being Bengali, Pradeep was naturally an East Bengal football fan. Heated debates would often break out between supporters of East Bengal and Mohun Bagan, with Pradeep always leading the charge. That was the spirit of youth—we thrived on creating two teams just for the thrill of an argument.

Pradeep was also a die-hard fan of Dharmendra and equally besotted with Hema Malini. During vacations, he would go home to Shyamnagar near Kolkata and binge-watch every Dharmendra film. On returning to school, he would narrate entire plots and dialogues in painful detail until our ears nearly fell off.

He would also initiate mock debates between Dharmendra fans and Rajesh Khanna fans, turning it into a full-fledged class event. We divided into teams and argued over who was the

greater star. It was all harmless fun—until one day, a new group of Amitabh Bachchan fans entered the fray and disrupted everything!

Then came 1975—and the release of *Sholay*. Pradeep, living so close to Kolkata, went straight to Jyoti Cinema to catch the film on a 70 mm stereophonic screen. When school reopened, he gave us a scene-by-scene retelling with such passion that it was like reliving the film. Not content with just narrating it, he began writing down the entire story in a diary—dialogues and all—so he wouldn't forget. We read those pages as if they were sacred text and applauded his dedication.

But Pradeep's wildest moment came during a prep class one evening. A classmate had dozed off while studying—a common occurrence after an exhausting day. To wake him, Pradeep had a diabolical plan. He made all of us form a human chain with our hands. One end of the chain touched the sleeping boy. On the other end, Pradeep slyly touched an open plug point with his finger. Zap! The entire chain got a mild shock—and the sleeping boy jumped up, startled. At the time, we found it hilarious. Today, thinking about it sends a shiver down my spine. How dangerously clueless we were! Was that blissful ignorance?

By the time we reached Class IX, exams loomed large. We buried ourselves in books. But Pradeep, aware he hadn't studied enough, grew anxious. He appeared for the English exam on the first day, and that night after dinner, while we were deep in prep, he walked around, bidding each of us a warm 'Good night'—smiling, chatting, laughing. Then, back in the hostel, he quietly took an overdose of sleeping pills. He didn't even lie down on his own bed; instead, he chose a roommate's bed—knowing that the boy usually returned late.

In the dead of night, foam (froth) started coming from his mouth. His roommate returned, saw the signs, and raised an alarm. Pradeep was rushed to Purulia Civil Hospital. He hovered between life and death for days, but finally, he made it back—alive. By then, our final exams were over, but we were just grateful he survived.



Where did he get the sleeping pills in such a strict hostel? The mystery was solved much later. The drug was '*Seconal Sodium*.' I only understood its implications years later when I became a doctor. But the name stuck in my subconscious all along.

After that incident, Pradeep Barua never returned to our school. He had to drop out after Class 9. And we lost a soul twin—someone who was an inseparable part of our days. Even years later, whenever we needed to check the time in

class, his memory would surface. Though by then, others had wristwatches too.

After passing Class XII, we all scattered like carrom coins. Years passed, and only when we had all found our footing in life did we begin reconnecting. And when we tried to trace Pradeep, nobody had an address. Nobody knew where he was. Then, much later, a whisper of a rumour reached us – that Pradeep Barua was no more. An accident, they said. I didn't want to believe it. It took a long time for that truth to settle in.

Even now, his memory lives on. A wristwatch, someone tugging at a newly grown beard, an old Dharmendra film, a discussion about *Sholay* – these things bring him rushing back to mind. Some people unknowingly leave pieces of themselves behind – in their habits, their quirks, their laughter. That's how Pradeep Barua lives on. In memory.

"Delhi Chalo – A Heavy Price for a Light Mistake"

Back in 1977, when we were in Class Nine, our school authorities decided to organise an educational trip to Delhi during the winter vacation. The news brought a wave of excitement. Everyone began planning eagerly, while a handful of friends—who had been to Delhi before—started showing off their half-baked knowledge.

For most of us, Delhi existed only in our history and geography books, so we were filled with curiosity and anticipation, counting down the days. Back then, we had no real understanding of money matters. We only knew that our class teacher and another teacher would accompany us as guardians.

As scheduled, we were to leave for Delhi by train the day after the winter vacation began. Once the holidays started, all the other hostel students left for home, and the remaining handful of us—the "Delhi Party"—revelled in the almost empty hostel.

On the first day of the vacation, some of our friends—who weren't going to Delhi—were heading home, and a few of us accompanied them to the Purulia station to see them off. That's where the trouble began. The Kolkata-bound train arrived, and just as it started to move, one of our friends attempted to

jump off the moving train. He tripped and fell hard on the low platform. Thankfully, he didn't fall onto the tracks.

And fate would have it—this entire episode was witnessed by the very teacher who was supposed to accompany us to Delhi.

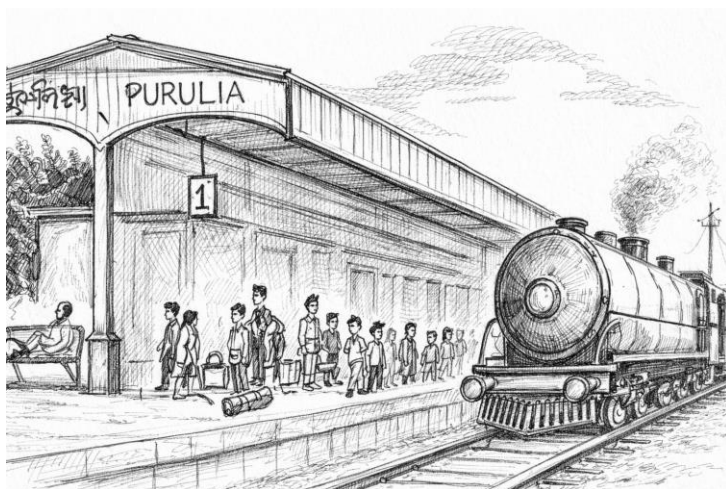
That evening, with "free India" in our heads, a bunch of us went to town to catch a film. We gleefully watched '*Maa*' starring Dharmendra, then the undisputed hero of Hindi cinema. We swaggered back to the hostel late that night, only to be greeted by bad news. Just after we left, the housemaster came for a surprise roll call. Anyone absent had their name taken down.

Our hearts sank. But we consoled ourselves—everyone was going home anyway, and we had just stepped out to watch a movie. Was that really such a grave crime? We were in the thick of adolescence then, full of budding defiance.

The next morning, we packed our bedding and trunks, ready to eat breakfast before leaving for the station. But just as we stepped out, we saw our notoriously short-tempered housemaster standing at the main door, catching each student, asking their names and thrashing them black and blue.

Clearly, he was punishing those who had gone out without permission the previous day. Normally fair-skinned, his face was now red with rage, practically spitting fire. As our English teacher, his fury erupted in colourful abuse—straight out of a British playbook. He truly looked like an angry English sahib.

One by one, we stepped forward, like goats walking toward the butcher. Just then, a senior whispered, "The moment you go up to Sir, start saying 'Sorry Sir, Sorry Sir' before he could speak."



When my turn came, I began chanting, “Sorry, Sir, Sorry Sir...” And what magic! It worked like a charm—just like a snake charmer hypnotising a cobra. Hearing my grovelling, he spared me a beating and let me go with a token slap on the ear. That crisis was narrowly averted. But the real storm was yet to come.

At the breakfast table, we received the crushing news: our Delhi trip had been cancelled. As disciplinary action for yesterday’s mischief, the entire excursion was called off.

We pleaded, begged, even signed written apologies promising never to repeat our mistakes. But the principal’s decision stood firm.

That day, the punishment truly felt like a case of *‘heavy price for a light mistake.’* Our Delhi dream was shattered. The plan dissolved into nothing but memory.

With broken hearts, we all headed home for the holidays. But going home unexpectedly brought another dilemma—what would we even tell our families? Why didn’t we go to Delhi?

Our first encounter with Death

In our school, a handful of students from Classes VIII to X were selected every year to attend the Republic Day parade in Delhi on 26th January. The chosen ones were generally proficient in marching and parade drills. As was customary, when we were in Class VIII, four spirited boys from our batch were chosen for the Delhi contingent. The rehearsal for the Republic Day event began almost a month in advance. Initially, the selected students were taken to Kolkata, where participants from the Eastern region assembled, before heading to Delhi.

Despite the biting cold, the month-long stay in Delhi, setting up tents, and rehearsing daily brought a unique thrill to our teenage years. The reward? A black blazer with the shimmering monogram "RD Camp Delhi" emblazoned on the chest pocket. Anyone who saw it immediately knew that the wearer had marched before the Hon'ble President of India on Republic Day. It was a matter of great pride back then. For those of us who didn't make it, we'd eagerly listen to our friends' tales of Delhi, trying to live their experience through their stories.

Every year, our school also sends students to an NCC Annual Training Camp. When we were in Class IX, we got the opportunity to go to Tezpur, Assam, for one such camp. Before leaving, we had to submit a signed declaration from our

guardians, confirming that the school would not be held responsible for any mishaps during the camp.

With all formalities out of the way, we enthusiastically boarded the train, singing “*Tai re nai re na*,” full of youthful excitement. From Purulia station, we first reached Howrah, then took the Kamrup Express to New Bongaigaon, before switching to a metre-gauge train to Rangiya. The entire journey was full of fun—we were like untamed calves, free and wild.

At Rangiya station, we had to wait nearly five hours for the connecting train. During the break, we went out and ate a steaming hot meal of rice, simple vegetarian curry, and fried vegetables, with the distinct citrus aroma of Assamese lemon. It felt divine. Little did I know then that my future would one day be deeply connected to this very land of Assam—that I would come to relish this kind of meal for the rest of my life.

After eating, we loitered near a cinema hall. I was intrigued by the Assamese sentence written in Bengali script at the ticket counter: “*সারি পাতি টিকেট লবো*” (*Sari pati ticket labo*). It took us a lot of guessing and finally asking a local to understand what it meant: “*Please queue up to collect your tickets.*”

Eventually, we took another train from Rangiya and reached Rangapara, which is essentially Tezpur’s station. By evening, we arrived at Tezpur, Assam. Initially, we were lodged temporarily in a school building. But soon, we were shifted to a remote open field outside the town, where we pitched tents and settled according to camp protocols.

The next day, we were taken by bus from the school to the campsite. We spent the day learning the basic rules and orientation. By the time we returned, exhausted, it was dusk.

Some boys bathed at the tube-well, while others headed to a nearby pond with soap in hand.

The pond was long, and despite the heat, it was brimming with water—dense and heavy water, as we later learned. Locals called it "*Padam Pukhuri*", or Lotus Pond. One group of boys went to bathe and returned, but suddenly, we realised one of them hadn't come back. I had just reached the pond then. His friends were calling out, assuming he was playing a prank and hiding. But there was no response.

Being from a village, I was an adept swimmer and prided myself on my stamina. So, I jumped into the pond and swam across in search, combing every corner—but in vain. We returned to our lodging without any clue of his whereabouts.

Soon, whispers began: the missing boy couldn't swim. He was from Dum Dum in Kolkata. The matter was reported to our teacher-in-charge, who, in turn, informed higher authorities. Hours had passed, and he was still missing. That night, we sat in our rooms, speculating on the worst. How long could a boy of our age survive underwater? Though we tried not to think dark thoughts, they crept in.

The fire brigade was called. They arrived with searchlights and, after a harrowing effort, retrieved his lifeless, bloated body from the pond's depths. He was taken for a post-mortem at the local hospital. A few friends accompanied him.

I must have dozed off while thinking about him. In the morning, we were informed that our friend, our peer, vibrant and young, was no more. Shock gripped us all. Memories came flooding back. A formal condolence meeting was held. His family in Kolkata was informed by telephone. It was then

that I understood why our guardians had to sign the waiver before the trip.

I still remember his father's words after receiving the news: *"Let this not happen again. No other parent should have to face what we're going through."*



The next day, we were relocated to another site, a vast field where we resumed camp life, having left one behind. The rules of NCC required that such an unnatural death be investigated. A military-style inquiry committee was formed under an Army officer. Each student who had gone to bathe in the pond that day was called in for testimony. Since I had been there too, I was summoned and recounted what I had seen. The officer, a Sikh, questioned me in clear Bengali, which surprised and comforted me.

Life doesn't stop. That's when I truly understood what *"The show must go on"* really meant. From the next day, we resumed our camp schedule—busy from morning till night. Our grief was quickly covered up by routine, left unexpressed. And grief that's unexpressed often morphs into something deeper later.



The camp life continued. There was music at the campfire, a “*Barakhana*” or special dinner on the last day, and then preparations to return home. We packed up and began the journey back on the same route. Everyone returned—except one. He stayed back, forever.



I’ve been to Tezpur several times since, for various reasons. Each time, I searched for that terrifying pond. Over the years, Tezpur has become more populated, the surroundings have

changed. But *Padam Pukhuri* remains unchanged. I still visit it, like a pilgrimage. Locals call that pond dangerous—claiming it takes one life every year.

Whenever I visit, I look at the pond, feel a deep sadness, and memories from that 1977 camp bubble up like unsettled indigestion. His face floats before my eyes. These memories are not easy to forget. Perhaps this *unresolved grief* is something we will carry forever—in waking moments, in sleep, and in dreams.



Escaping School for Rafi Night

We were in Class Eleven, the year was 1979. A trace of a moustache had just started showing under our noses—adolescence was nearing its end, yet adolescent mischief still pulsed in our veins. Flouting school rules felt like a form of rebellion, and when that rebellion turns into a habit, it often invites trouble. But if such defiance is short-lived and one returns to the straight path, the memories linger like faded watercolours—nostalgic and vivid at once. Revisiting those moments later brings unadulterated joy.

One day, a rumour swept through our hostel — Mohammed Rafi Sahib was coming to town for a live concert that Saturday. In simpler terms: *Rafi Night*. That piece of news stirred a frenzy in a few of us. We *had* to sneak out of school to witness it. Our school was nearly five kilometres from town. While buses were available during the day, at night, one had to walk the whole distance. We had no idea where exactly the concert would take place, no clue about ticket prices — moreover, none of us had money to buy one. But what we did have was boundless enthusiasm, blind courage, and as I said, that itch to rebel.

On the day of the concert, after dinner, a few of us got ready to head out. As always, my partner-in-crime for such misadventures was Alope. I nervously asked him, “We don’t

even have tickets. What if we go all that way and can't even get in? What's the point of risking so much then?"

He replied confidently, "They'll open the gates after midnight. No tickets needed by then."

That ray of hope was all we needed. The five of us sprang into action. We made our hostel beds look slept in—mats aligned, mosquito nets hanging—so it would appear we were fast asleep.

Under the cover of darkness, we crossed the field behind the hostel and reached the school's boundary. In those days, the school boundary was fenced with barbed wire and dotted with tall cement posts. At one particular spot, a portion of the barbed wire had been torn—a passage only we knew about. Our thin teenage frames could easily slip through, and more importantly, we knew how to come and go unseen by the watchman.

If memory serves rightly, it was a full moon night. We ran and walked alternately across the empty grounds. Once we reached the main road, our white school shirts and pants glowed under the moonlight. To anyone watching, we must have looked like a gang of petty thieves—or ghosts, perhaps.

As we hit the main road, faint music started drifting in from afar. In the stillness of night, Rafi Sahib's voice reached our ears—he had taken the stage. That was all the motivation we needed. We picked up our pace, homing in on the music since we didn't even know the venue's exact location.

That year, Rafi Sahib's song "*Kya Hua Tera Wada*" from *Hum Kisise Kum Nahin* was a national sensation. We were sure he would open with it. We were desperate to hear him sing it live.

Eventually, we reached the venue. From a distance, we saw the lit-up stadium and heard the music more clearly. We felt triumphant—as if we’d won Olympic gold! But then, disaster struck. Right in front of us, approaching from the other direction, was our school’s Principal—coming back with his family, presumably after enjoying *Rafi Night* himself.



Had we seen a ghost, we wouldn’t have been so terrified. Reflexively, we jumped aside and ducked into a roadside veranda where a few wooden cots (*Khatia*) were laid out. Some labourers were fast asleep on them. We crawled underneath, trying to hide, but our movement startled the workers. Thinking we were thieves, they began shouting. Somehow, we calmed them down with hushed threats. At that moment, our motto was: “Save yourself first!” After a tense few minutes, we

peeped out — our principal had disappeared into the night. We seized our chance.

Just as Alope had predicted, the gates had been thrown open. We dashed in and reached near the stage. There he was — Mohammed Rafi himself, standing with a harmonium, singing his heart out. Usha Khanna stood beside him, joining in the duet. In those days, there was no television, no YouTube. To see and hear such a legendary singer live was a once-in-a-lifetime moment. Each song carried his signature emotion and finesse. We were spellbound.

But as with all good things, the show eventually ended. The crowd began pouring out. We too had to return, but there was no rush — nor any desire to go back. While loitering near the stage, we spotted some of our school seniors. We all belonged to the same flock that night — no one was going to report anyone.



And so began the return journey — back to the hostel, through the same route, singing songs all the way. Just as we slipped

through the barbed fence into the school grounds, dawn began to break. The birds were chirping, greeting the new day.

And we? We had just wrapped up one of the most unforgettable nights of our youth.

“Your day is just beginning, while ours has just ended...”

School Annual Day

Today marks the beginning of ‘College Week’ at our medical college. It will continue for the next seven days. Although regular classes are suspended for students, outpatient services and patient care remain fully operational. Inter-class sports, music, drama, and cultural competitions have kicked off. I’ve also been assigned to judge a few of these cultural events.

All of this reminds me of the Annual Day celebrations from nearly fifty years ago at our Sainik School.

As far as I recall, this grand event used to take place every March. The entire month would be buzzing with activities and preparations. Every day after class, various competitions would begin – both indoor and outdoor games. Events were divided into three levels: Junior, Middle, and Senior, depending on the classes. The competitions were held among four houses – as I’ve mentioned before – Patel, Tagore, Tilak, and Chittaranjan.

The most gruelling event for me was the marathon race. Participation was compulsory for everyone. Early in the morning, we had to run a set route that encircled the entire school campus and return to the starting point. The path was full of potholes and included crossing the main Ranchi Road. It stretched all the way to the village of Lakda, where the school boundary ended, then looped back to campus. By the

time we returned, weaker runners like me were utterly exhausted, lungs pumping like a blacksmith's bellows.

Some of us even stuffed handkerchiefs into our mouths, hoping it would ease our breathing. At the finish line, each participant received a slip indicating their ranking. Unsurprisingly, my rank was always near the bottom!

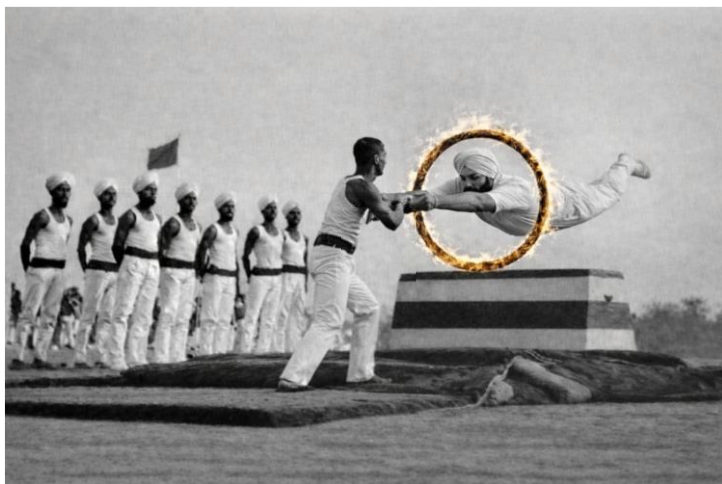
But even after this herculean effort, there was no respite — the day would roll on with routine classes, milk break, and finally the bell for home time.



On the final day, the morning would begin with a grand march-past on the main field. The uniform for that day was white trousers and a T-shirt in the respective house colour — red/maroon for Patel, green for Tagore, blue for Tilak, and grey for Chittaranjan. Each house would march in sequence. The house captain would lead the group, carrying a flag on a tall pole. Marching in a synchronised pattern with the school brass band and background music, we would salute the chief guest upon reaching the main dais.

In Olympic fashion, the best athlete would light the ceremonial torch, which would burn throughout the day until all sports events concluded.

Then began the athletic events — 100m, 400m, 1500m sprints, relays, long jump, triple jump, high jump, pole vault — finals of each category were held back-to-back.



After lunch, the afternoon events resumed with the much-awaited 'Mass PT'. Participation was mandatory for all students regardless of class.

To make this a success, our games teacher, Mr G.B. Singh, worked relentlessly. Morning and evening, he rigorously trained us on the field. The athletic field was a large quadrangle with no grass. A pandal was erected by the main road where our teachers, guests, and parents could sit and enjoy the day-long programme – it was also “Parents' Day”.

North of this pandal stood rows of eucalyptus-like trees, beneath which temporary tents were set up for each house where participants could rest. Just behind was the road leading to the hospital. To the south, a sloping area marked the start of a mangrove patch. And opposite the pandal lay a grassy, bushy slope not visible from the main side. This hidden pathway was famously used by students who wanted to sneak out of school at night.



During the Mass PT performance, we would climb up from that slope in synchrony – all dressed in white shorts, sleeveless vests, white canvas shoes, and socks. Accompanying us was a professional band, gorgeously dressed and playing majestic music. As we climbed the incline in step with their beat, the sight was truly mesmerising. For the next 20 to 30 minutes, we performed various drills in perfect unison, drawing gasps of admiration from the spectators.



Next came the prize distribution. All of us stood in lines, grouped by house, clapping for the winners. The biggest excitement lay in finding out who would be the individual athletics champion and, ultimately, which house won the overall championship.

One detail I haven't mentioned — the professional band used to come from Fort William, Kolkata. A few of us became friendly with the band members and would visit them in the evening to listen to a range of music played on their instruments. I still vividly remember their renditions of *Arabian Nights*, *Tango*, and others. Those sounds used to stir our young souls.

And then, after dinner, when the school captain announced a holiday the next day, all the students would erupt in joyous cheers.

Had it happened today, we'd all shout in chorus — "Wow!"



The Forbidden Corners of Our School

In our Sainik School, there were certain areas on campus that were deemed “forbidden zones.” These places were informally labelled ‘out of bounds’ for us. And as is always the case with childhood, the more forbidden something was, the more it sparked our curiosity. Those who dared to sneak into these restricted areas would come back and narrate exaggerated tales, enthralling the rest of us. Naturally, the rest would begin looking for opportunities to embark on such forbidden adventures themselves.

One such place was a massive water tank behind the school building, en route from the milk break area to the hostel. As little boys, that tall concrete tank appeared to us like a giant. Occasionally, we’d see the plumber unlock the tiny door at its base and climb up. One Sunday, finding that door open, a few of our friends slipped in and climbed the narrow staircase to the top. As they reached the open roof and began exploring the surroundings, a teacher spotted them from below. He was yelling at them, but they couldn’t hear a thing from that height. When they finally came down, they were let off with only a light reprimand.

Naturally, they returned as heroes, boasting to us about how the entire school campus looked from above—buildings, people, and all. For us, it was nothing less than a poor man’s aeroplane ride! That day we learned that the staircase inside

the tank was dark and filthy, with exactly 102 steps leading to a rooftop encircled by a railing, much like a watchtower. I too made it up there later, but by then the thrill had faded. The tale had gone stale, so there was nothing new left to brag about.



Another forbidden spot was the open terrace above our hostel or ‘house’. I’ve already written about the attic just above the stairwell, so I won’t repeat that. Though each house was a three-storeyed structure, none of us ever ventured onto the terrace—or even thought of doing so. The first time a few of us sneaked up there, our hearts were pounding with excitement, as if we were about to find a hidden treasure.

Once atop, we wandered across the rooftop only to find moss-covered patches from rain, and scattered dome-shaped concrete pillars about three feet high—these were actually coverings over the iron rods from the lower-floor pillars. The

view from above, however, was lovely. You could see the garden below, the demarcated verandas, and the dining hall – all laid out like a miniature model.

The third restricted area was the kitchen – the inner sanctum of the dining hall. As juniors, we weren't even allowed to go near it. But as we moved up the ladder of seniority, all transgressions were conveniently forgiven. Boys would often sneak in, making all sorts of demands – extra salad, more onions, powdered red chilli, or stashing away food for later. Looking back now, that kitchen was quite filthy. But years later, when I revisited during a school reunion, I saw a transformed place. Clean and mechanised. Roti-making, vegetable cutting, peeling potatoes – everything was now done by machines. Coal stoves had given way to cooking gas.

The fourth place was beyond the school's boundary, at the far end of the campus. Just past the fence stood a small Shiva temple, and beside it was a path that led to a village named Ramnagar. Going that way was officially forbidden. Yet, many of us would walk down that road on Sundays. No one really objected – perhaps because it was a village and not a town. If it had been a town, there would have been an uproar. That would've counted as a major transgression!

Another area that was off-limits was the principal's mango orchard. Oh, the memories tied to that place! One boy would wait below with a pillow cover, while the agile ones – like our very own Gour Gopal – would scamper up the trees, pluck raw mangoes, stuff their pockets, munch one or two on the spot, and toss the rest down to be smuggled back to the hostel.



There was a particular mango tree in that orchard with small, sweet-sour mangoes that everyone coveted. Poor things— thanks to our enthusiastic looting, the mangoes rarely made it past their childhood. Forget adolescence, they didn't even see the dawn of their youth\

Bioscope, Movies, and Cinema

“Dekho dekho dekho bioscope dekho, Dilli ka Qutub Minar dekho...”

— the rustic man chanted rhythmically, not quite singing, but more like reciting a poem without a tune. With one hand, he jingled the *ghungroo* bells, while with the other, he cranked a handle shaped like the Bengali letter ‘*৭*’ fixed atop a large box. The box was mounted on a stand, and little children, eyes glued to tiny peepholes, were watching moving pictures through it. That contraption was called a ‘*bioscope*’.

As kids, the moment we saw one, we would run towards it and stand behind the boy peeping through the viewfinder, brimming with curiosity, asking him what he could see.

Back then, watching a bioscope cost three paise per person. We — two brothers — would haggle and manage to watch it together for five paise. The reel of still photographs would move from one side to the other, and we’d enjoy the show with utter delight. Once done, we would return home with the triumphant pride of warriors returning from battle.

Gradually, the bioscope vanished. No longer did anyone roam the neighbourhood carrying a bioscope box on their head.

By then, a cinema hall had sprung up in our small mofussil town. It was called *Western Talkies*, though no western films were ever shown there. It mostly screened old Bengali or old

formula masala Hindi movies. Every Friday, a new film would arrive, and a group of men would roam the neighbourhood with instruments, announcing the title. One man beat a drum, another held a long tin megaphone in one hand, striking a stylish pose with the other hand on his waist, and dramatically proclaimed the names of the hero, heroine, and villain. We'd gather close, straining to hear each word. Even if we got to watch only one film a year, listening to those announcements and seeing the posters gave us the feeling that we'd already watched the movie.

At that time, the front rows at the cinema cost as little as forty paise. But the smell of bidis and cigarettes hung thick in the air. Tickets for the back rows cost seventy-five paise. The crowd was huge, especially on Fridays and Sundays. The hall ran three shows daily – matinee, evening, and night.

And without buying roasted peanuts during the interval – shelling and salting them yourself – the cinema experience felt incomplete.

In 1972, I joined a Sainik School hostel. There, once a month, films would be screened in the open ground using a large screen. These were mostly patriotic or biographical. Watching a movie seated in an open field was compulsory. If the film was boring, we would drift off to sleep, enduring mosquito bites. But if it was good, its memory lingered for days. We were shown many black-and-white English films. Most of them we hardly understood, but were compelled to call them “great” out of habit or pressure. Sometimes, movies were screened in the afternoon. At times, it would start raining during a show, or the wind would shake the screen so much that it looked like the actors were dancing.

After a few years, the school stopped screening movies in the open. Instead, we were taken by bus to town to watch films – a treat we greatly enjoyed, especially because it meant fresh air and a change of scenery.

Still, something felt missing. The secret wishes to sneak out of school and watch a film in town never quite left us. Looking back, I wonder – was it really about the film? Or was it a deeper rebellion against rules and the system?

I still remember a few such daring escapades. The thrill of sneaking out for fun and a movie remains vivid even today. Strangely, people often remember their mischief more than their virtues.

Let me take you further back – around 1974. We were in Class Seven, staying in the hostel. It was a Sunday morning. We'd just finished breakfast and were lounging on the semi-circular cement veranda in front of the dining hall when we heard that three of our classmates had snuck out at night to watch a movie but had been caught by the seniors.

Our curiosity surged. We wanted to meet them and hear the story. But they had already been summoned by the seniors for punishment. That meant only one thing: a beating.

Later, when they emerged, even before we could offer our sympathy, they were already engrossed in narrating the story of the film *Kala Sona* in such animated detail – with dialogues, acting, and mimicry – that we forgot about the punishment and were transported into the world of cinema. They had watched the film, got caught, got punished, but escaped the headmaster's or principal's attention – so the episode ended there.

That age is strange. Getting punished and not crying was a matter of pride. Breaking rules felt heroic. Everyone goes through that phase—but most forget it and become self-righteous later.

The way our friends described *Kala Sona*, it felt like we had watched it ourselves. The film got imprinted on our minds even though our eyes never saw it.

But what stayed with me more than the story was this: it's possible to sneak out of the hostel, watch a film at night, and return undetected. And even if caught, seniors might beat us—but that's it. The bruises fade.

Years passed in the same routine at the hostel. One Holi morning, after the usual *phaguwa* festivities, we were exhausted. The rain was gentle, the campus mood laid-back. Everything was perfect for a secret movie escape.

Aloke and I became partners in crime. We borrowed two black *Duckbag* raincoats from a friend and wore them. We could barely recognise ourselves—we felt like comic characters, Phantom or Mandrake. Slipping quietly out of school in the drizzle, we caught a bus and reached town.

At the cinema hall, disappointment awaited us. The movie had already started, and the tickets were sold out. After all, cinema runs on schedule—it wouldn't wait for us.

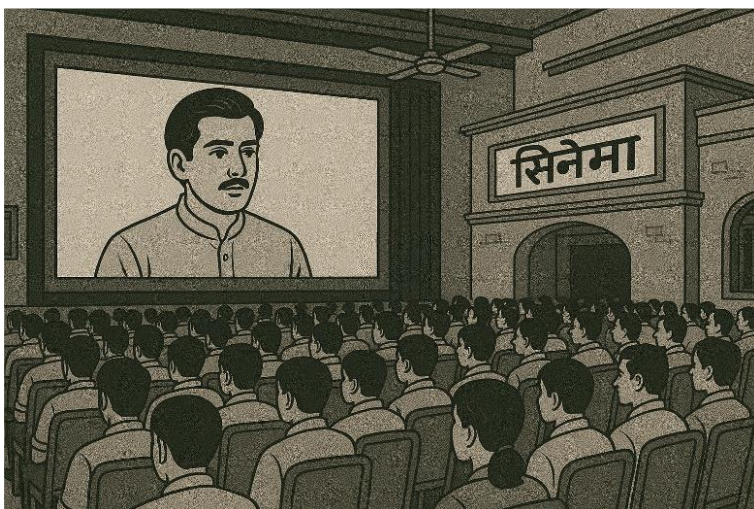
Did we really go to watch a movie? Or was it just the thrill of breaking rules?

We wandered around town, sampled things we didn't get in the hostel, and eventually it was time to return. At the bus stand, there was no local bus to take us near the school. An express bus to Ranchi arrived, but it wouldn't stop anywhere

close to campus. Left with no choice, we boarded it. We planned to jump off near the sharp bend close to school—assuming the bus would slow down.

We stood on the rear step, in the drizzle, gripping the luggage rail, waiting. The bend came, but the speed of the bus didn't reduce. Aloke jumped first. He landed badly—skidded across the road in a pose resembling full-body prostration. I thought, "He messed up, but I'll manage better."

With that confidence, I jumped too. Same result. I skidded like him, raincoat tearing, shoes ripping, body scraped and bleeding. Luckily, no vehicles followed us. It all happened in seconds. We got up, managed fake smiles, and were relieved no one saw us. At that age, saving face was more important than escaping injury!



We climbed through the fence, crossed the field, and returned to the hostel undetected. Only in the room did we notice the raincoats shredded at elbows and knees, blood oozing from the abrasion of our skin. Our borrowed raincoats and pants

were beyond repair. Yet, despite the pain, our hearts were full of glee. What an adventure! But returning the borrowed raincoat in that state? Well, that’s a story for another day.



"The One Who Got Caught is a Thief; the Rest Are All Gentlemen"

"Sir, please verify the seal on the exam script packet before we open it."

That was the voice of an Associate Professor when I went to conduct the postgraduate MD examination, just like every year. He handed me the sealed packet of answer scripts with that formal caution. I opened it with a solemn face and began sorting through the answer sheets.

Suddenly, my mind slipped into the past—to a vivid memory from school. The first time a question paper leak occurred. We were in Class VII. Back then, question papers were typed using carbon paper, and the carbon paper sheets were discarded in the office dustbin. Just before the General Knowledge (GK) exam, someone found a carbon sheet with the typed questions still faintly visible. Jackpot! The leaked questions made their way through the class, and everyone aced that GK test with flying colours.

The school authorities never could figure out how all the students cracked such a tough paper so effortlessly.

But there's a darker, more thrilling memory that surfaced right after that.

It was 1977. We were in Class IX at Sainik School. Academic pressure was mounting, and our attention was drifting.

Teenage hormones, wild imagination, and a touch of rebellion—it was all in the air.

Before the final exams, rumours started doing the rounds. This time, the evaluation would be very strict. Only the deserving ones would be promoted to Class 10. The rest—well, they'd flunk and eventually vanish from the rolls. The aim was to filter the cream and ensure the school's board results looked good. Understandably, the whole class—about 50 of us across two sections—was thrown into panic.

Our class had a unique bond. Fights, pranks, and mischief aside, we were united like brothers. So, the news shook everyone. The studious ones buried themselves deeper in books. The average ones, like me, tried to pull up our socks. Some gave up altogether. One boy, sentimental to the core, even went through a farewell ritual before the results!

History was the villain of our syllabus. Most of us feared it. We couldn't quite make sense of why. Looking back now, I think it was the dry, mechanical way it was taught. Or perhaps the repetitive civilisations and those long-winded answers in English that were so hard for us to write.

The History paper turned out just as we had feared—tough as nails. After the exam, disappointment hung in the air. Some had submitted blank sheets. Failure loomed large. The idea that so many of our friends might not make it to Class 10 was unbearable. But desperate times spark desperate ideas.

Someone—sharp, daring, and imaginative—came up with a wild plan. The answer scripts were stored in the Assistant Headmaster's room, stacked in neat rolls on his desk. What if we sneaked in, took out the scripts, filled in the correct answers, and put them back without a trace? Madness, right?

But a few brave hearts drew up a stealthy *modus operandi*. Silence was key. Not a soul—not even the birds—should know. The Assistant Headmaster's room had a single wooden door and a two-by-three-foot ventilator above it, divided by iron bars. It looked impossible—but not entirely.

One slim, agile boy was chosen. After dinner, while the seniors were busy in the study hall, the chosen team moved in. The Class X boys soon returned to the hostel, leaving the area deserted. Standing on a table, one boy hoisted the chosen lad onto his shoulders. The boy then wriggled through the ventilator and dropped silently into the room, torch in hand.

He found the Class IX history script bundle, tucked it under his arm, and exited the way he came. Back in the classroom, the selected students—those who had truly fared poorly—were called in. Their names matched their answer sheets. With textbooks open and help from others, they began rewriting their answers.

We followed a code of ethics. This was a lifeline, not a cheat fest. Only the hopeless cases got to write. This wasn't to boost marks but to avoid failure. A few of us dictated answers, while they scribbled furiously.

Just then, a twist. One of our classmates—a day scholar—hadn't returned home, and his father came searching for him. He walked into our classroom and found all of us bent over books. Ironically, we looked like the most disciplined batch in school. The acting was so natural—it's amazing what fear can do to teens! The father told his son to come along and left without suspecting a thing.

Later that night, the answer sheets were rolled back, tied with a string, and returned to their exact place. Thankfully, this was

an era without CCTV or security guards. But a thief always leaves a clue.

The next morning, the Assistant Headmaster unlocked the room and found a fine line of dust scattered in front of the door—probably fallen from the old, rarely opened ventilator. Then came the final results.

Miraculously, everyone passed and entered Class X.

Years have flown by. Those sharp minds who conceived and executed that daring caper now hold prestigious, serious positions. Many of them are in senior government and corporate roles.



I, too, have moved on—now heading a department, having seen many shores. When I lock the cupboard that holds university exam papers and answer scripts, I can't help but remember that thrilling adventure from 1977. That one reckless, unforgettable night.

“Let the farewell chalice be filled with sweet memories in the celebration of union, please bring it back.....”

After entering Class Eleven, a sense of freedom and self-importance swept over us. We were now seniors—matriculation was behind us—and most importantly, our minds were set on joining the NDA. That, after all, was the true objective of the Sainik School: to prepare us to become officers in the defence forces by cracking the NDA exam.

So, the entire year in Class Eleven went by with dreams of the NDA and the hard work required to chase them. That year, we all went to Kolkata to appear for the UPSC entrance exam. A handful of us cleared it and went on to face the SSB (Service Selection Board) interview.

But reality, as always, had other plans. Slowly, many of us began to realise that the dream of the NDA might be nothing more than a mirage. By then, the Class Eleven board exams were knocking at the door. Sitting in the exam hall, we understood how much we hadn't learned. The results put a spotlight on our shortcomings.

After the results, three of our friends joined the NDA. The day they left, our emotions were tangled—an odd mix of pride, envy, and a strange emptiness.

We moved up to Class XII. We were now the senior-most of the school. It felt as if we were the nine remaining sons of *Haradhan* roaming the lanes in search of the lost one (a famous Bengali poem '*Haradhan had ten sons roaming the streets; one disappeared somewhere, leaving nine behind*'). Our group was thinning, and an unspoken fear about the future started creeping in—like quicksand beneath our feet.

Most of us buried ourselves in studies with eyes closed and ears shut. A sense of seriousness set in. The focus now was on how to score well in Class Twelve. A few others, however, gave up and began to live carefree, detached lives.

Within months, five more of our classmates cracked the UPSC and left for the NDA. That time, almost everyone but me cleared the written exam and went for the SSB interviews. Most came back empty-handed. Only a lucky few cleared the medicals and finally made it to the promised land—the NDA. Out of our entire batch, only eight eventually hit that coveted mark. The rest of us could only listen to their stories and weave our own imaginations around their words.

Meanwhile, the final board exams approached. But greater than that looming pressure was the heartbreak of having to leave our beloved school and dearest friends. After spending eight long years here, even our own homes had begun to feel like unfamiliar places. Back at home, I felt like a temporary guest. The neighbourhood friends had drifted away emotionally. Yet ironically, I'd have to spend my days with them.

We sat for our final board exam in March 1980—on the 4th, to be precise. And now it was time to say goodbye. Every house in the school organised a farewell function. At our Tagore House farewell, those of us leaving sang a group song

together. Abhay-da had worked hard to write lyrics by adapting a tune from a popular Hindi film. Subhashish played it on the harmonium, and we all sang in chorus. That group photo, taken during the performance, still sits with me—one of my most cherished possessions.

The song was from the film *Sharmilee*, and even today, its words echo within me:

"Khilte hain gul yahan, khil ke bikharne ko

Milte hain dil yahan, mil ke bichadne ko..."

How perfectly the lyrics matched our emotions that day.

Then came the time to pack. With heavy hearts, we began folding up our lives. Everyone started exchanging addresses, carefully noting them down in little notebooks. Some even wrote quotes beside the names as keepsakes:

"Dear friend, stay my friend across lifetimes;

Even if you find new ones, don't forget me."

"Can flowers bloom with just dew, without rain?

Can hopes be fulfilled through letters, without meeting again?"

A few collected passport-sized photographs of everyone, as if those tiny prints would be the map of our lives going forward. There were no mobile phones back then. Even land phones were rare. Letters were the only lifeline we had. And for letters to reach, you needed the correct address.

What amazes me now is that despite so many addresses being exchanged, so many friends vanished like carrom coins scattered off the board—never to write or call again in the fifty years since.

Our journey home was planned. The boys from Kolkata would board an evening train, and a few of us would leave the next morning on a different one. The school bus would drop us at Purulia station. We hauled up our old trunks and bags into the bus. Standing outside were our house master, a few beloved teachers, and our juniors – there to give us our final send-off. We bowed before the teachers, holding back our emotions as we stepped into the bus. One of our friends couldn't control himself – he broke down hugging Mr. T.P. Das sir. Somehow, he was coaxed into the bus.



As always, the school bus waited for us in front of the dining hall. Behind the driver's seat sat our familiar Sunil-da, with his face serious, gaze steady. The engine revved, and we began to wave from the windows. I suddenly remembered Tagore's lines –

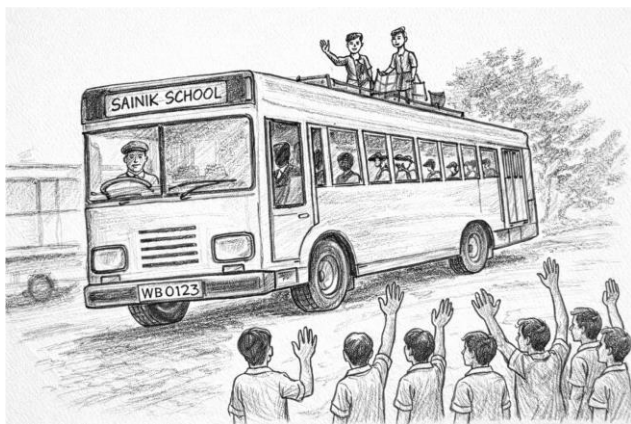
"Hush! Listen to the wheels of Time—his chariot rushes invisible,

Pulsating in the heart of eternity.

*Crushing under wheel the despairing blackness,
From whose fractured heart
Spring stars like teardrops.
O my friend, that onrush of Time
Ensnared and lifted me onto his chariot
On the path of reckless adventure
Far, far from you..."*

The bus rolled slowly over the school's paved path. The people who came to see us off gradually turned into dots in the distance. I pulled out a handkerchief from my pocket. Everything outside the window turned blurry—the trees, the path, the sunlight. I couldn't see clearly anymore. Inside the bus, silence prevailed.

*"O Lord of Wealth,
Whatever I gave you, it was your own gift;
The more you have accepted, the more you have made me
indebted.
Farewell, my friend."*



Epilogue

After leaving Sainik School in 1980, we scattered in all directions, like carrom coins struck from the board. There were no mobile phones then. Only a handful of friends had a landline phone at home, and making a phone call was expensive. Letters were the primary means of staying in touch, or else one had to meet someone in person. As a result, friends who lived in or around Kolkata somehow managed to keep in contact with one another. Boys like us, from small towns and mofussil backgrounds, slowly drifted away—lost like kites whose strings had snapped.

For a while, letters went back and forth. Then life's battles took over, and everyone grew busy shaping their own future and careers.

Those who went to the NDA were the first to find their footing — settling into the disciplined, dignified lives of officers and learning to stand tall in their orderly surroundings. With time, some completed their college education and entered jobs. Many joined banks. A few passed through engineering colleges, endured four demanding years, and secured good placements. Some became school and college teachers. And quite a few vanished abroad, settling far from home.

Those like me, who chose medicine out of sheer passion, kept grinding away almost blindly for nearly twelve long years, clinging to the promise of

achhe din—better days ahead. Toward the end came a modest stipend, barely enough to count.

By then, contact with school friends had nearly disappeared. We were drifting upstream like boats without oars. Occasionally, a sudden encounter with an old friend would lead to hurried exchanges—quick updates about each other’s lives and whispered news about others gathered through hearsay. Some friends slipped away completely, becoming addressless and eventually lost to life itself. In those days, revisiting our old Sainik School or indulging in shared memories felt like an unaffordable luxury.



Then, quite unexpectedly, one of our friends—Colonel Apurba Samanta—was posted to Delhi Cantonment. That single event became the bridge that reconnected us all. Apurba would methodically call one friend, collect another friend’s phone number and details, and then move on to the next. In research terms, this method is known as the “snowball technique.” Reaching friends in the armed forces was relatively easy, but tracking down those of us buried deep in civilian life must

have taken enormous effort. Slowly, the list of old friends began to grow.

By then, I had joined Assam Medical College at Dibrugarh as faculty, balancing a job with medical practice, and had acquired a landline phone of my own. Like winning a small lottery, I too found myself drawn into that expanding network. Those were days when, one after another, long-lost friends resurfaced. Truly, Apurba accomplished something remarkable.



In 2007, we held our first-class reunion in Kolkata. Most friends arrived with their families. By then, we had crossed adolescence and were swimming fully in adulthood. Time had changed us so much that recognising one another was not easy. We had to introduce ourselves anew, slowly renewing old bonds and rediscovering familiar connections. That day was undoubtedly a milestone in our lives.

In 2012, we came together again for the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Sainik School. Since then, we have managed to meet almost every year, usually somewhere around Kolkata.

For friends like me who live far away, even a sudden visit to the city often turns into an impromptu “mini reunion.”

When our friends’ children get married, whether everyone can attend or not, we all contribute together to buy gifts. Those who do make it to the wedding often wear similar outfits and celebrate with uninhibited joy. In times of crisis too, everyone steps forward, extending a helping hand.



Now, in the age of mobile phones and WhatsApp, all our friends are just a touch away. Whenever we meet, we slip effortlessly into nostalgia, returning to our schoolboy days and talking endlessly – reliving shared memories. For a while, we forget our present identities and positions in life. What remains is open-hearted friendship beneath an open sky – enduring, unbroken.

*Review of the same book in Bengali
named, 'Phire dekha smriti katha'*
(ফিরে দেখা স্মৃতি কথা) -----

1. From Amazon

17/03/2026

I enjoyed reading this book, “Phire Dekha Smriti Katha”

Contents are effortlessly relatable. The stroll down memory lane is deftly scripted for invaluable emotional resonance.

Extraordinary eloquence, the author's hallmark, emerges from vivid imagery, interesting phrases and simple language.

From childhood innocence to teenage antics and impulses, the author walks you through it all.

Echoes come alive in droves from easy familiarities of the past: the hostel corridors, the forbidden terraces, the Saturday night hangouts, the irresistible library visits, the lonely ponds and the muddy tracks along the faraway fence. And also, the outdoor cinemas, the whispers of the back benchers, the comfort of old friendships, the sound of silence of the exam halls, the spirited community gatherings and the excitement of the annual day function. Those were the days, “drenched in freedom, soaked in fun”.

Nostalgia deepens with every new episode read and run through. The longing for the past becomes intense. You reach a point of reconnection with your younger self.

The reader's engagement doesn't end here. Likely, not meant to be. There's curiosity to be settled, curiosity centred on the road travelled so far.

Do you see how much your past has cascaded into your present? Can you fathom the transformation your younger self has undergone?

You look back and forth through every episode as a signpost and find your answers.

Finally, it's a resounding affirmation that residential schooling is synonymous with heavenly experience, where the community members are like wonderful facilitators. This book, written as a treasured memoir, is also a tribute to the alma mater.... **By Kajal Paul and Archana Paul**

2. Reviewed in India on 21 March 2026

Sainik school life and the bond they develop.

I enjoyed the book like anything....it finished so quickly....so interesting really this book needs to be treasured.... I will always keep waiting for your next publication.... All good wishes...

3. Reviewed in India on 18 March 2026

Nostalgia covered in a book

A must-buy product for those who want to relive their old golden memories, back to school days.

By Dr Akashdeep Datta

4. Reviewed in India on 17 February 2026

About the school life at Sainik School

This book is about the life of sainik school boys who spent a vital formative part of their life in the school. The author is from a humble background when he joined the school & how he had grown in school. Everywhere there is a restriction, a rule breaker will always be present. Human nature is freedom, which is most valuable in life. Happiness comes from sharing; it could be from dangerous & trouble situations also. Astonishingly, the author remembers minute details of incidents that occurred 50 years ago. Overall, any sainik school boy shall enjoy reading the book, as his childhood days shall vividly come alive when he reads the book.

By Tapan Patra

5. Reviewed in India on 26 March 2026

Very Good Book

Reading this book evokes a gentle, bittersweet ache — one that is, in essence, another form of nostalgia. By bringing back memories of days gone by, it fills the mind with a strange yet comforting sense of calm.

All in all, it is a remarkable and deeply moving work, one that lingers in the reader's heart long after the final page is turned.

By Pranab Bhattacharya

6. Reviewed in India on 16 March 2026

Must Buy

Very nostalgic and written in a very lucid language, it reminded me of my hostel life. A must-buy book, and it's worth reading.

By Abineet Singh and Somreeta Singh

7. Reviewed in India on 11 March 2026

Important call out

Phire Dekha Smriti Katha" is a deeply touching memoir that gently takes the reader back to the unforgettable days of school life. Dr Soumitra Ghosh has beautifully captured the essence of growing up in Sainik School Purulia, portraying not just events but the emotions, discipline, and camaraderie that shape young minds during their formative years.

What makes this book special is its authenticity. The author writes with such honesty and warmth that readers can almost feel themselves walking through the school corridors, sharing laughter with friends, facing strict discipline, and experiencing the small adventures that define childhood. The stories of mischief, punishments, friendships, and cultural activities are narrated in a very relatable and vivid manner.

By Joydeep Seal

8. Reviewed in India on 9 January 2026

Best Buy

A must-buy product for people of genuine interest and curiosity, full of facts and wisdom. Go for it.

By Rohit

9. Review - 08/03/2026 -

Good evening, Soumitra....enjoyed your book like anything....*etoh taratari sesh hoye gelo*....so interesting really this book needs to be treasured.... I will always keep waiting for your next publication.... All good wishes...

By Moushumi Routh and Dr Sankar Routh

10. Review - 09/03/2026 -

A beautifully written piece with truly exquisite narration. The emotions it evokes are as sweet as they are profound, complemented by a language that is both engaging and expressive.

In many ways, it reflects the school life most of us have experienced (apart from hostel life), which makes it deeply relatable. The writing gently stirs countless cherished memories of adolescence — of school days and friendships that remain forever etched in the heart.

I look forward to spending more time with this book. Wishing you all the best.

By Supriya Dutta

11. Review - 11/03/2026

Dear Soumitra,

I read "*Phire Dekha Smriti Kotha*" in a single sitting, and as I turned its pages, memories of those sweet, unpretentious days at Sainik School kept quietly resurfacing in my mind. Along with them came a rare, almost unexperienced joy that left my heart feeling refreshed and deeply enchanted.

What stands out most in your writing is its honesty—its unhesitating, vibrant simplicity, and the candid way in which you express your thoughts. It is this very quality that keeps each memory alive, relevant, and unblemished even today—memories that have shaped and refined all of us in our own ways.

I truly believe that your book will be received with a distinct sense of dignity, will win the hearts of its readers, and will find its rightful place among them through its own quiet charm.

By Mr Tarit Dasgupta, Ex-teacher of Sanik School, Purulia

12. Review - 12/03/2026 –

Just finished reading. Great job!

Arindam Mitra - Washington, DC

13. Context: Looking Back – A Memoir

After receiving the book, I took some time to read and respond, and I thoroughly savoured the reading experience. In 2026, while sitting in my home in Bangalore, or at times in a doctor's chamber waiting for my turn, I would suddenly find myself transported to the 1970s—to a boarding school in Purulia, right into the midst of its students' lives. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the book felt like a time machine!

Although I did not find many direct parallels with my own school days or later hostel life, certain memories and experiences perhaps transcend time, place, and gender—common to adolescents everywhere. This book not only stirred those memories but also reminded me of many schoolmates with whom I have now completely lost touch (even in this age of social media!).

Perhaps because the previous generation did not grow up with abundance, luxury, or technology at their fingertips, their adolescence was illuminated by a sense of adventure—a fresh, green spirit that could even turn punishment into a source of joy. Reading about those times made me reflect on our own lives and that of the next generation—sometimes with a sigh, and at certain moments, even with tears welling up unexpectedly.

Spending such a crucial phase of life among teachers and students from different regions and social backgrounds, engaging in sports and co-curricular activities, surely enriched the students of Sainik School, Purulia in many ways. Within these two covers, the author may have tried to capture memories of a significant period of his personal life—memories that are not always happy, as he himself

acknowledges. Yet, for the reader, this is not merely a memoir; it stands as a document of a time.

The book's cover and the quality of its pages are quite good. The use of lines from Rabindranath Tagore in almost every section is particularly appealing. However, I couldn't quite understand why, in an entirely Bengali book, the page numbers are written in English.

— **Sushmita Ghosh (Payel) Bangalore**
2nd May, 2026