



# Pranks and Patriotism

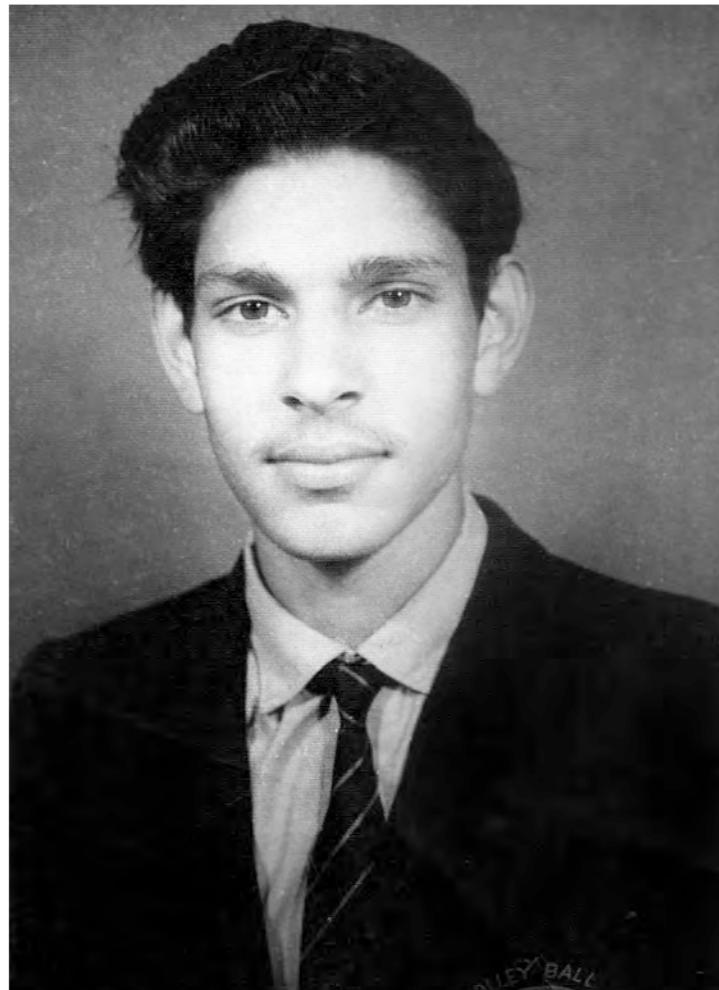
This chapter, I would especially like to dedicate to all those wonderful moments and incidents that made hostel life an entertaining one. Those moments were like milestones of a beautiful journey. Well, before I start, I would like to ask forgiveness from God for stealing Him away from his devotees.

My journey started from the west end of the school. We had a small well-maintained temple which was frequented not only by the students just before the examinations began, but also by our residential staff’s families. Every evening, these women would come with their diyas for benediction. As they circle their plates laden with diyas and decorated with garlands and a pyramid of laddoos devotedly trying to appease the ones above, not too far away, impish eyes follow the plates. Among those pairs of eyes, were mine. We used to wait impatiently for the women to finish their prayers. And when they come out of the temple to where we used to wait with folded hands like humble devotees, we quietly used to sneak inside the temple, pick up the sweets and sheepishly tell God that we have taken it as His sweet blessing. And then we used to relish those sweets. I guess back that even the Gods too had their share of entertainment.

Another story that makes the rounds at Old Boys’ Meets is the caning of Satya Narain. Every hostel has these few personalities who are always close to the cane. Satya Narain was one such boy in Pilani. Just as we need to have our meals every day, he needed to taste the cane from a teacher, housemaster or the Principal. He shared a close relationship with the cane. When one fine winter afternoon he was called by the Principal, he knew that his appointment with the cane had come. Before meeting the Principal, he rushed to his dormitory and

started wearing one dress over another. He also made sure that his bottoms were padded sufficiently to minimize the effect of the cane. With a sarcastic smile on his face, he walked into the Principal's room and bent down for caning. He was so habituated that he knew exactly what the Principal would ask him to do before caning. But this time he was not called for caning. The Principal, on seeing Satya Narain look so chubby and well fed was shocked and suspicious. He asked him to remove his blazer wanting to know the secret behind his immediate weight gain. Poor boy, he was caught unaware, too. Our man was in big trouble now. It took the Principal and the peon fifteen minutes of tug-of-war to strip Satya Narain off his blazer. Immediately, both Principal and the peon burst out in laughter, holding their stomachs with one hand and beating the table with the other. Satya Narain was wearing a sleeveless shirt with a tie on a chilly winter day. Poor guy, this time his smartness backfired on him heavily. He became an entertaining joke at every Old Boys' Meet. Thanks to this incident, he'll be remembered by all for many more years to come.

There's another reason why the boys of boarding schools will be remembered for years to come. Unlike all the pranks and naughtiness we were famous for, we will also be remembered for our patriotism. Be it for our school or for the nation, even a little skirmish between our houses would work up our patriotic sentiments to a frenzy and unseen craziness. One particular incident for which my school would be remembered, mostly at the PMO (Prime Minister Office), occurred just before the Indo-Pak war in 1965 when incursions had started, the news of which was constantly being aired on the radio. Hearing all these, tempers ran high amongst the students. Ranbir Rathī - 1966 batch could not take it and shot off a letter to the then Prime Minister Shri. Lal Bahadur Shastri, telling him to increase his height (as he was short statured) and health and to take action on the Pakistanis. And if he cannot do it, he should tell us. He further wrote that the students had the strength, manpower and courage to do it for the country. The letter was written on the school's post card and to hide the identity, he tried to erase the School's name by putting some ink on it. What he failed to realize was that, the PMO office would use modern techniques to remove the ink and find the



Col. Ranbir Rathī during his school days.

origin of the letter. In about a week's time (it used to take that much time for a letter to reach Delhi from Pilani) police and Indian intelligence sleuths descended on the school to investigate. Sitting in the Principal's office, they were trying to match the handwriting. Ranbir Rathī was bold enough to walk up to the Principal's office and own up the responsibility of the letter. After initial inquiries, everybody had a hearty laugh and appreciated his boldness and sense of patriotism. Although later on, Ranbir Rathī confessed that he was very scared. Later on, Ranbir Rathī went on to join the Indian Army and is now retired as a Colonel.

Winter went by and the unwelcoming summer came bringing along hot days and lazy afternoons and along with it everything changed, from uniforms to daily routine. At any boarding school, it was a part of daily routine to take an afternoon nap during the summers. But just like you can't straighten a dog's tail, you can't make Dev Vashisht sleep. He was the 'Ted Bundy' of the school, naughty and smart. So when everyone used to sleep on summer afternoons, he would be chasing dogs. God knows what kick he got from chasing poor harmless cuddly creatures. In fact, he practised this ritual quite religiously. But one fine day the prayers of the dogs were answered.

It was another dog-chasing afternoon and Dev was enjoying every moment of it. As a daily practice, the Principal - Mr. B.K. Sood - was taking his inspection round, making sure that everyone was on his bed. Dev thanked his stars for spotting the Principal first and he immediately climbed a tree and camouflaged himself among the tanned leaves. Sitting still he prayed not to be discovered, but I guess that day the prayers from the dogs were more convincing. Since it was a hot afternoon, out of all the places, the Principal stood under the shade of the same tree. Poor Dev was stuck. He couldn't climb down nor was the Principal in any mood to part with the soothing shade. Above all, Dev had to make sure that he was still like a log. Well, Dev was not a grown man who had come to the school to join the Sniper Division. He lost his cool. In fear of getting caught, he couldn't keep still and worse he still could not stop his Bata hawai slipper slipping off his feet and landing straight on the Principal's head like a rubber atom bomb. I think, at that moment his life flashed in front of him. Of course the Bata bomb was harmless, although the Principal in shock almost jumped out of his skin. Their eyes met, the cane met his flesh and the dogs prayed one more time. This time it was a 'Thank You' prayer to the Principal and to the one above all, God.

Dev Vashisht. That was one name. You can't be serious if you think there would be just one Dev in a boarding school. There were many clones of Dev and when they got together it was easy to believe that Armageddon was near. That's what happened one frightful night at the school.

Where there were Dev and his clones, there had to be a rough rocking of an otherwise peaceful campus. To think of it now, strangely, there was an unending war to attain dominance of the school campus between two-legged boys and four-legged creatures. Shambhu was the name of the mysterious dog, which lived among the boys on the campus. He was also known as the dog with double life; one as a campus dog and the other as a 'Super Dog'. Unlike other dogs, one would never spot Shambhu lazing around on the green grass or wagging

his tail and barking at birds on the tree. In fact, no one could spot him in the first place. He used to vanish from the campus only to appear when the breakfast, lunch or dinner bell rang. It was quite strange and many thoughts and deductions circulated about his double life. Then one fine day, few boys thought of solving the Shambhu mystery. A massive search was launched. Every dustbin, every bush, every park bench, every corner of the wall, every swing, under every car and even every tree was scanned but no one found him anywhere not even his paw marks. From great mystery it was turning into frustration. Now, the boys only had their last bait to catch Shambhu, the refectory bell.

The bell rang, the magical sound filled the air and somewhere a head turned towards the direction of the mess. Dashing through the field and leaving a cloud of dust behind him, Shambhu reached the mess. Finally, he was in front of the boys only to become a pawn to carry out their evil plan.

It was almost midnight, the good boys were asleep and the naughty ones were still counting sheep. Suddenly the stillness of the night was shattered by the loud ringing of the refectory bell which was followed by loud barks of Shambhu. Everyone woke up. Some thought it was a ghost and some were so shocked they didn't know what to say. The evil plan of the boys worked. It was later revealed that these boys had tied Shambhu's tail to the bell. The Principal took the matter quite seriously and wanted to punish the boys responsible for it, but couldn't pinpoint the boys. With time the anger subsided and he consoled himself with the thought of boys being boys.

Even Mayo College had its own 'Shambu'. Though with a different name and was not as big as him. But yes, just like Shambu, he too made his mark on the book of Mayo College.

Here is an extract from experiences from Mayo College

*"Mrs. Merchant - one of the staff members of Mayo - had one of those dogs which are small, hairy and plump and go about sporting bells on their collars. Now it came to pass that this dog became afflicted with some disease, whereby it became necessary for him to be put to sleep. I do not know if this condition was a result of a difference of opinion with the aforementioned Jackie.*

*There were no vets at Mayo College or for that matter any boarding school. The closest was Dr Manohar Singh, the infirmary incharge, like Iodex and Mr. Juglan were for BPS, Pilani, who restricted himself to prescribing those numbered mixtures used for curing headaches and stomachaches of boys who were actually suffering from home sickness. Concocting death potions for a terminally ill pooch was out of the line of his duty. It was indeed a distressing situation for the Matron and her lovely daughters who could not bear to watch their pet suffering. Then appeared a gallant knight in a shining apron, our very own Mr. Saxena, the Chemistry teacher and Assistant Housemaster BT. He had a peaceful solution to the problem, unlike the violent one applied to Jackie by the Housemaster.*

*Safely locked inside a cupboard at the Chemistry Lab rested a sealed bottle labelled 'Potassium Cyanide'. This deadly poison was, perhaps, ordered at the same time as Lord Mayo's architects were ordering marble for*

*the Main Building. Mr. Saxena ordered his lab assistant to fetch this bottle. Mr. Saxena was not taking any chances. He did not even summon his best chemistry student. Instead, he took it upon himself to do the honours.*

*A saucer of milk was brought. To this was added a generous dose of that deadly Cyanide. We, of the junior upper dorm of Tonk House, who had only recently been introduced to the wonderful science of Inorganic Chemistry were once again there to witness this historic occasion. The dog, which had been kept hungry all day, suspected no foul play and greedily slurped up the saucer of milk. The 'Badam Flavour' did not unnecessarily worry him until his legs became unsteady. He gave Mr. Saxena one last look as if to say "Et Tu Brute?" rolled over to one side and closed his eyes. While the ladies of the Merchant family were drying their moist eyes with their handkerchiefs, the dog stirred and rose unsteadily to its feet. He threw up the offending liquid and looked at his tormentor straight in the eye as if to say, 'What next?'*

*We never got to know what went wrong. Cyanide is Cyanide and here is a dog defying the laws of Chemistry. Was it a case of wrong labelling? Was it adulteration? The mystery was never solved.*

*To bring this story to its conclusion, it may be said that a 'Tonga' was fetched and the 'cyanide survivor' was taken to a vet in town where it was put to sleep with a lethal injection."*

There are numerous stories of dogs living on the campuses of all the boarding schools. Only a separate edition dedicated to them would do justice to this subject. As for now, we all love the fact that they were one company we always felt good about being around us.

Shambhu was just a small part of the huge history the bell stores in its belly. The bell was always an integral part of everyone and anyone right from students to the Principal. Its ring was the sign of meals, of classes, of games and of the arrival of a new day. Though there was just one bell it always sounded different. The 'meal ring' sounded sweet, the 'class ring' sounded boring, the 'game ring' sounded exciting and the 'P.T. ring' at five in the morning sounded depressing. The bell was so much into us that any prank by students subconsciously started with the bell. So it was the bell that gave birth to the mother of all pranks.

Speaking of pranks, one incident which would forever keep me amused was the one involving Kuldeep Singh (1975). He was a boy who had been honing his skill of sleeping with his eyes open in the class. Being a back bencher he had been practicing this over the years. Unfortunately, one day, his luck ran out and he was woken up to the real world. It so happened that one day the teacher asked him a question. Getting no reply from him, he asked him again. But our 'sleeping beauty' was galloping away to fantasy land. It was only when the teacher came closer to him that he discovered to his amazement that Kuldeep Singh was sleeping with his eyes open. Post this incident, Kuldeep Singh was in great demand all over the school to teach this art to all.

The houses at school were quite at a distance from the mess hall where the paralysed bell hung. Even simple pranks like ringing the bell and running off to the house unnoticed were out of the question. No one said, but I firmly believe that a marooned mind is a devil's factory, producing original pranks.





**‘The sound of life.’**

The school bell is an integral part of every boarder. Though there was just one bell it always sounded different. The ‘meal ring’ sounded sweet, the ‘class ring’ sounded boring, the ‘game ring’ sounded exciting and the ‘P.T. ring’ at five in the morning sounded depressing.

In the photo, an MS student rings the bell to mark the end of the day for every MAPSIAN.





**'For all the bell tolls.'** This is the bell which timed our lives right from waking up in the morning till the time we hit our beds exhausted. Also, this was the bell that was the centre of all pranks in the school. Shown here is the school bell of BPS, Pilani.

One historic day, a few senior students, without anyone's attention tied a thin chord to the bell and it went all the way to their house's balcony which was around a good 100 odd metres away. When the night crept in and the whole campus was fast asleep, they started to pull the chord slowly. Hell broke loose after that. The bell started to ring and every single soul woke up, even Shambhu did. The chord was so thin that no one could notice it at night. With more than ten ghost stories doing their rounds every night, no one had second thoughts. Our night guard, who was supposed to be Hercules, proved to be quite a ghost-fearing man. He just wouldn't go near the bell. But there were a few students and teachers who were a little more practical than the others. Out of curiosity and without any fear they gathered around the bell. At that moment our prank masters knew that they had to back off. So they tugged at that chord with all their might so that it would snap. It did. Immediately they ran down and tucked themselves into their beds, pretending as if they were least aware of what was happening. A narrow escape it was for them or today I would have written the story of their getting suspended or expelled from school. With the bell tolling and reminding us of all that we did when we were near it, we could never sever it from our life, but would rather keep it alive forever. And that's what we did when it came under threat. Over the years the school bell had aged and cracked. A school can't run without bells and so it was quickly replaced by a piece of railway track, which not only sounded horrible but also sounded very much unlike what we were used to. Old boys could not take it and presented the school with a big brass bell to continue the legend and keep alive every little bit of memories attached to it.

Today, whenever I visit my boarding school, I stand in front of the same old bell and smile, reflecting on all those memories that have kept my boyhood alive.

Unfortunately with time, the definition of enjoyment for the children has changed. Small pranks that didn't harm anybody changed into destructive acts like breaking window panes or electrical fixtures and at times even damaging school furniture. The difference in pranks we played in our days is that, today we can still narrate those incidents to our teachers and family and still laugh about it whereas they can't. For if they are to narrate any incident like breaking their school furniture or for that matter any such prank which is in bad taste, they would be rebuffed and rebuked by people from all sections. Maybe that is their way of enjoying or expressing their disapproval towards some things which are completely unexpected by the school. In all cases, they are dealt with all seriousness.



