



The First Day

The year was 1964.

I was just five years old, when my parents decided that a boarding school would be the best for me. Before I could even evaluate the then alien word ‘boarding school,’ I was teleported to a planet called Birla Public School, Pilani. This planet was completely different from the one I was born in. People here didn’t believe in the word ‘privacy’ for they were too closely attached to each other, where beds were only four feet long and a bedroom consisted of four to ten beds and everyone did exactly what the other person did

– studied, ate, slept, played and even woke up at the same time. It was like a domino, only, every piece fell at the same time. Initially, I couldn’t make head or tail of the compulsory daily drill, but that taught me the meaning of the word ‘routine’ without flipping through the pages of the Oxford dictionary.

I was not alone. There were many like me who had come from other small planets called ‘rural.’ Everything was twenty years ahead of our planets. From books to infrastructure, classrooms to playgrounds, we all felt like kings. It was completely a

new thought for us. Amongst us, there were also boys who had no educational background. Their parents belonged to that section of proud farmers who had been raising families in huge havelis and narrating stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, sitting under the shade of banyan trees, passed on to them by their ancestors. And even in this age of education, the farthest they went was signing official documents with their thumb impressions. But these parents knew what was the best for their coming generations and enrolled them in some of the best possible educational options



Above: Ms. F. Swamikannu: on a tour with the boys. Ms. Swamikannu was our Headmistress. All our teachers, Headmasters and Headmistresses, and even our Principals, always wanted to be part of our tours and treks and often accompanied us. TO BEST TIME BOND WITH THE STUDENTS IS ON THE GAMES FIELD AND ON TOURS AND TREKS.

available. While some amongst them enrolled their children into boarding schools and in the process sacrificed their desire to be near their children. After all they knew that they had taken the right decision and their children would grow up to be fine ladies and gentlemen. I guess my parents also had similar thoughts and dreams, when they decided to send me here.

It's difficult to remember, but I think I cried when my parents left me here. Everyone does.

The toughest part for both parents and the child is the day they bid goodbye to each other. At that moment, a weird and strange chill takes over one's mind. No matter how hard one tries, or how brave one tries to act, our vision becomes blurry with tears in our eyes. The whole world appears to be bigger than it really is. The few steps parents take towards the exit seems kilometres away. To a child, at least to me, it seemed like I would never see my parents again. I guess my parents felt the same. To top it all, I was a complete alien to the place. I still remember when I was left all alone in the hostel. It was just for five minutes.

A little senior came and befriended me. It always happens that way. You are never alone.

I would never forget all those people who cared for me, just as much as my parents. Our matrons - Sister Rajammal, Sister Pew, Sister T. Clarke, Sister M. De. Rezarieux, Sister D. Rutter, our Headmistress Miss F. Swamikannu, who had joined BPS, Pilani from Scindia School, Gwalior, Housemaster Mr. G. S. Shekhawat and hostel warders Shyamlalji, Brijlalji, Banwarilji, Budh Ramji and Laxmiji are still close to our hearts. They were, 'the good Samaritans.' They took care of our books, our beds, our uniforms and just about anything and everything. They used to bathe us, put the all-famous red castor oil on our hair and change our clothes. In winters, they would never forget to apply Vaseline on our cheeks and lips and gave us a spoonful of Waterbury's compound tonic for our well being. Then there was Richhpal barber, known more famously as 'the one man demolition squad,' humming an unrecognisable tune and always nibbling something in his mouth. He

would bring our crowning glory down to dust with just a few snips. Till date, none of us could figure out how his scissors moved faster than his fingers. That was the world I was brought into, strange, unexpected and yet homely. Tell me, apart from my mother, who would wake up in the middle of a winter night to check if my quilts were warming me or the floor?

Today, being the Chairman of a school, I on an average meet a few hundred parents every year. Incidentally, the institution which I run with the help of the ancillary staff and the teaching faculty is also a boarding school and I still keep convincing parents how protected and comfortable their child would be with us. Some are still hard to convince. Can't really blame them, though. Parents would be parents. My mother and father had asked a million questions before saying 'Yes' to my being put in a boarding school.

I still remember meeting a boy's parents from Nagaland. They came to enroll their son with the fear that he will be marooned on an island. Their faces conveyed so much grief that, for a moment, I felt I was the keeper of some dreaded dungeon. It was

only after I gave my own example, that they were consoled.

Contrary to popular belief, a student in a boarding school finds friends easily. In fact, the bonds of friendship developed in a boarding school are much stronger than anywhere else. I had made a friend in my first fifteen minutes of my hostel life.

It's psychological. No one can successfully be alone. We all look for company and more so in a hostel, when we are out of our known environment. We need it even more urgently. If I am not mistaken, the first society that came into being was through a primitive form of hostel or common ground where a few

food gatherers and hunters living in their own dark caves, accidentally landed in one spot which provided them with company and protection. We all need company, not just to survive but also to grow and develop ourselves. That's the law of humans and that's how God has created us.



Above: A short nap to refresh themselves. A short nap for about an hour after classes is a routine in all boarding schools. Here, children's are taking their afternoon nap.



'Friends within fifteen minutes.' Contrary to popular belief, a student in a boarding school finds friends easily. In fact, the bonds of friendship developed in a boarding school are much stronger than anywhere else. I had made a friend in my first fifteen minutes of my hostel life.



In residential schools children are exposed to so many activities that homesickness remains no where near them. Seen in the above picture is a toddler pool in a boarding school, in early 1960s.



'Sweet dreams come with a sound sleep.'
Junior dorms at The Mann School.



Raksha Bandhan was just one of the many festivals celebrated across boarding schools. **Left:** Celebrating Raksha Bandhan with my elder sister Sudarshan and younger brother Capt JS Mann (extreme right)

The age of prince. Below: This was the age when we thought we knew everything and acted likewise, only for our teachers to bring us down to earth.

My Class of 1970-71 (Class VI) with our Headmistress & Matrons

(On the floor) Rakesh Rastogi, Srikant Ladia, Anurag Poddar, Rajendra Mittal, Nagesh Tiwari, Rattan Kumar Jangra, Vijay Dhawan, Prasanna Kuwar, Anil Saigal.

(On Chairs) Bhupendra Rana, Mrs. T. Clarke, Yogendra Singh, Mrs. D. Rutter, Miss F. Swamikannu (Headmistress), Mr. G. S. Shekhawat (House Master), Vikram Singh, Mrs. M. de Rezarieux, Devendra Singh Rana (Gen. Leader).

(1st Row) Mahabir Singh, Suresh Soni, Anil Lahoti, Anil Kumar Jain, Rajiv Kumar, Sunil Kumar Sharma, Bimal Mahendroo, Suresh Jawa.

Bimal Shah, Udai Prakash, Mukul Sharma. Nirmal Sethia, Virendra Singh, Saha Deo, Ajai Malpani, Vipani Joshi, Rajiv Mahajan.

(2nd Row) Neeraj Yadav, Ashok Hooda, Shyam Bagaria, Krishan Kumar Bansal, Vimal Bhatia, Anand Saraf, Suman Bali, Pradeep Pareek.

Ravindra Anant Gondhalekar, Sanjai Rai, Niranjan Rathore, Vinod Kumar, Naresh Bansal, Adesh Agarwal, Sushil Saraf, Dhanvir Jain.

(3rd Row) Gajendra Singh, Yudhishtir Singh, Suresh Agarwal, Pawan Saraf, Raj Singh, Subhash Chandra Verma, Sanjeev Sehgal.

Virendra Singh, Joginder Mann, Ashok Raj, Raj Kumar Joon, Kuldeep Budhiraja, Satyavir Singh, Rajendra Tanwar, Shailendra Mehra.

