



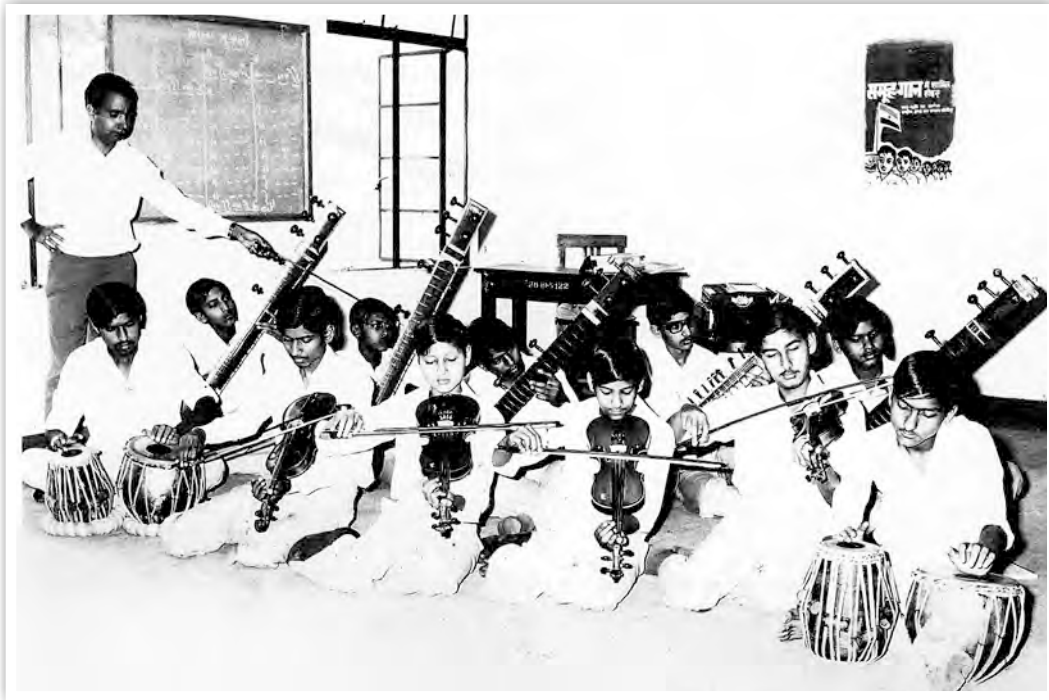
# A Commander and a painter

Some sensible man once said, “Jack of all trades is a master of none.” But every hostel’s child welfare department believes, “Jack needs to try all trades to choose which one to be the master of.” My experiment with trades started with painting. It was in the year 1970 and I was already a half grown man studying in VI standard when I painted my first masterpiece. I would call it ‘A Summer Afternoon’ whereas Leonardo Da Vinci and my Art teacher would call it ‘A Summer Blasphemy’. The masterpiece on the canvas had two buffaloes bathing in a pond on a summer afternoon. To think of it now, it was not just blasphemy; it was indeed a sacrilege of art. My Art Teacher didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t discourage me either anyway.

Many years later, on my visit to my school, the present Principal and I went for a round to the Junior School and to my shock and delight, I saw my painting hanging on the wall of the school corridor. Out of curiosity she asked me, what gave me the divine inspiration to illustrate such alienated interpretation of colours and shapes onto the

uncomplaining piece of canvas? I told her that, from where I came, all I knew and saw were buffaloes, ponds, trees and the village. I further told her that, if I had seen computers or planes or missiles I would have drawn them. Today, it is on the top ten incident-jokes of my school. Good or bad, but the painting did attract the required audience. In fact, it still does today and that’s why this particular painting of mine today affords company to other much more beautiful paintings done by talented students, in our school corridor. It’s close to my heart, and tomorrow if it’s on sale, I will make sure that I am the highest bidder.

Well, I could have improved my strokes on the canvas if only I was not chosen by our music teacher to be a sitar player. I was in class VII and I was already making a few important decisions of my life, the hostel life. I was honest enough to realise that, with my painting I could still achieve great exhibition of laughter which was not possible with the strange collection of the school’s musical instruments. My heart confessed even before trying, I was not born a musician. Painting was a different matter though. I



Above : Art classroom of BPS, Pilani. Students with Mr. Gaurang Charan. In those days, stalwarts such as Mr. Charan guided our hands over the canvas.

Left: With our music teacher Mr. Ahuja, who couldn't make music sound any sweeter to me even by singing one of his intense ragas.

Opposite (Inset): Our art teacher and the noted painter, Mr. Gaurang Charan receiving the National Award from the erstwhile President (Late) Giani Zail Singh.

could still get inspirations from the beauty of my village. Music? What would I sing? The mooing of the cows or my own trademark calls to get them in line to make them head straight home? I knew Mozart, Beethoven or Ravi Shankar would never take me as their disciple, even after my seventh reincarnation. So when the choice was given to me to choose between art and music at the beginning of the session in the class, I raised my hand holding a brush. But God had other plans for me. I am not judging His intentions, but I think He could have gone for a second thought or second opinion from one of his colleagues.

Apparently, no one opted for music. There was no batch. This disappointed Mr. Ahuja, our music teacher, who couldn't make it sound any sweeter to us even by singing one of his mind-unsettling intense ragas. The fact was not as light as his music that hung on the thinnest air. So, one fine day or one 'unmusical day', he walked up to the art room and asked Mr. Gaurang Charan (our Art teacher and one of the renowned painters of India, known around the globe. He had also won a national award in 1981 on Teacher's Day) if some boys would volunteer for music classes. Now, that was not music to anyone's ears. There were many like me and they knew their gifted, strong farm hands were not made to hold the fragile wind and stringed instruments. Everyone was clear about their choices and Mr. Ahuja and Mr. Gaurang knew that when they saw all the students putting their heads down, pretending very hard to give an impression that we all were completely engrossed in our art pieces. It would not be hard to imagine that, at that particular moment, my proud art teacher would have thought that we were the next Leonardo Da Vincis, Picassos and Salvador Dalis, in the process of creating new masterpieces. It was a beautiful sight for my art teacher but not for Mr. Ahuja. Realising that there were no volunteers, he randomly picked some of us for the music class. I was one of them. I guess even God needs some entertainment in-between listening to billions of

sins confessed. I begged and pleaded and proclaimed that I was a talented painter and had all my desires to stay in the art class. I went wrong there, as my art teacher found it a little hard to believe that I was a painter with any potential. I don't blame him. After all, who could forget the famous 'Summer Blasphemy'?

Soon I found myself trudging behind Mr. Ahuja to the music room. Unlocking the door, and hastily taking off his shoes, he ushered me in. Unlacing my shoes, I gently took my first few steps into that hallowed room which would soon turn into a horror room for me in the days to come. Entering the room, I bowed my head on seeing the statue of Goddess Saraswati sitting in a yogic posture with her veena on her lap. Her face told me that she was enjoying her moment of bliss amidst these instruments. But more than asking for her blessings to make me a successful sitarist, I asked for her forgiveness, for I knew even her days of peace and tranquility were nearing their end. Seeing me show such reverence, I could feel that Mr. Ahuja was pleased. But, for how long?

Even as I was lost in my thoughts and apprehensions, Mr. Ahuja walked across the room and picked up a sitar. By the look on his face I could tell that that sitar must have been his favourite one, for he soon made me sit on the carpet and fold my leg on top of the other like some sage. He then, gently placed the instrument on my lap and with a look of encouragement ended my days as a painter. No







Do, Re, Mi... the piano and me. Putting my hands to the piano as a tribute to my music teacher.

sooner my lessons began; an impish enthusiasm began to work within me. Forgetting it to be an instrument of the Gods and maestros, I wielded it as my gun and shot Mr. Ahuja in every class by snapping its strings. To my disappointment, those bullets were like cotton balls. It did no harm to him. For every time I snapped a string, he would replace it with a new one, and in a sweet voice whisper into my ears, "*Kitne bhi taar tod le, tujhe rakhunga music me hi*" (Go, ahead. No matter how many strings you snap, I will still keep you in my music class). Now, that was scary. After all, no one volunteered for his classes and that might have got to his nerves. Moreover, due to low attendance, there were many boxes of shiny strings at his disposal.

As the story goes, everyday I would be in that room screaming, along with a few others, screaming out in our awful voices and disturbing the peace and serenity of the place. A little correction here. Let me frame it this way, disturbing the peace and serenity of my fellow friends in the hostel. Today, even when a good forty years have passed by, I am putting my hands to the piano and hope that I would be able to dedicate a self created composition to my music teacher. I guess he would love it or at least pretend to love it.

My second experiment was with the mind-boggling game called chess. Now chess to me was a cool game. Irrespective of the number of times I was checkmated, I still like the game simply because whenever I 'killed a pawn' of my challenger, I would hit that pawn piece with my pawn piece till my opponent's pawn piece fell to the floor. But very soon, I became an expert commander of the sixty four squares and became the lord of this common room game. Then again, chess was not the trade I had to master. It was swimming.

I took to water like a fish. My swimming instructor noticed that. They always do. Soon I landed in the inter-school swimming team and became a member of the 'Royal Life Saving Society' and made it to the Inter-District Competition and finally made my instructor proud by becoming a

state level swimmer. The most glorious episode of my swimming career was the day I won the District Swimming Championship. In the closing ceremony Brig BC Pandey, Director, Birla Education Trust (BET) and my Principal Mr. B.K. Sood were so impressed by my performance that they gave me the honour to declare the swimming meet closed, by retreating the flag. It was my day. Though the flag was brought down, my chest and pride were still at the top of the flag pole. Moments such as these are rare and beautiful and one can never forget them.

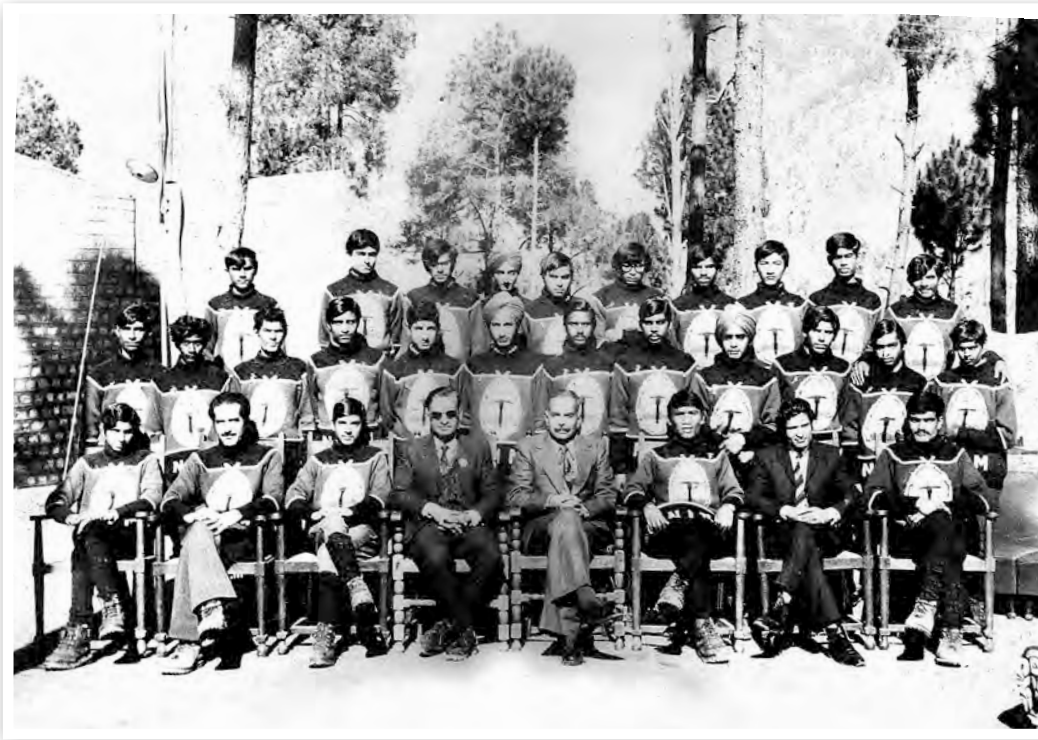
It was not over. Being in a boarding school, I still had to explore other trades or activities apart from swimming. NCC was fun. Mountaineering course from Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkashi was adventurous.

Being a Parade Commander felt great. The title of Band Leader proved to many boys, teachers and friends the fact, that to a certain extent, I did have an ear for music. Now with all those snapped strings and hours of ear splitting *riyaz* with Mr. Ahuja I would say becoming the band leader took more than my will power.

Apart from being smart and knowing the march, the most important criteria to qualify as the Band Leader was that you had to learn at least one musical instrument. As sitar was out of the question and a vocalist, not needed by a band, I was in a fix. So I needed to pick something that didn't involve my mouth and those fragile strings. I met my match, the side drum. All I had to do was to beat it with two small sticks. Even with those, I was a complete stranger. I guess when God was creating me; the angel who was supposed to play the harp at the backdrop was on sick leave.

Mr. Gurung, our Band Master, had his hard days and sleepless nights with me in the band. His role had changed from the moment I joined the band. More than teaching music, he was doing the job of changing the skin of the side drums. I was not a soft boy. I was as hard as a farmer. I guess every time, I raised the two little innocent drum sticks, he would start counting his reserve side drums skins. But





Above left: Nehru Institute of Mountaineering.

Above: My monogram of Nehru Institute of Mountaineering.

ultimately he did teach me and I learnt the marching tune. Days passed by and finally the day came when I became the Band Leader. I saw that smile of pride on his face when I threw the Band Leader's Mace, higher than the previous band leader which took two perfect somersaults in the air before gracefully landing on my palm immediately followed by a stiff salute to the Chief Guest while the mesmerising tune of 'Sare Jahan se Acchcha, Hindustan Hamara' was being played by the band. Though at times I think, more than the pride it was an expression of ease. Not because he taught me well but because all his side drums skins were safe, henceforth.

Fate always has beautiful things stored for all of us and for the lucky ones; happy moments are always a déjà vu. They repeat themselves, at times, twice. My children, Gaurav and daughter Ashrika became Band Leaders. They both also became the Captains of the school's basketball teams and both played Nationals in basketball. I guess, I passed onto them the pride of being a band leader in one way or the other. Mysteries of life will always be mysteries. No debates here. Take for instance, the case of we three musketeers. We, three brothers or musketeers (as I believed we were like them), my elder brother Late Capt Jawahar Singh Mann, I and younger brother Capt Jitender Singh Mann were state level swimmers. Now with our affinity to aqua so strong, we all believe in the fact that the probability of our evolution was close to the aqua life.

Still continuing with my experiments, gymnastics seemed a fabulous break. A few rolls on the mat like a cat and to my joy, I realised I was not that stiff. And the proudest moment was when I was selected as the School Captain. I always knew, I would be a leader some day. I was so proud that I carried this school captain monogram, leaving everything else behind, even to the cover of this book. As it proudly adorns the cover of this book, the faces of my publishers look equally sullen. Not because they did not like the monogram, but

because they thought that their Art Directors were equally good and had given me a plethora of choices which I had all rejected for this monogram. If only they understood earning this monogram was a matter of pride and spoke all about me without me uttering a single word.

One aspect about boarding schools, that shines like a neon sign in streets of Las Vegas, are the number of activities that build a school. More precisely, the different sports. Now when I say sports, it starts from basketball, followed by horse riding, table tennis, mountaineering, swimming, football and all those which one can possibly play in a boarding school, finally ending with NCC. Now, for many parents, sports does not help a child become a management guru or a doctor. For them it is a distraction. According to some, a school is the place where they send their child to shine in academics, not bring some shining trophies home.

They are so wrong.

As a matter of fact, it helps students to be more focused on their academics. Unlike popular belief, sports and academics complement each other. It is like refreshment for students in between Trigonometry and the Laws of Physics. I am not saying this from an imaginary utopian world view but from experiences and examples.

There are, and always will be many students who have and will perform brilliantly in both, academics as well as sports. Unfortunately, in day schools there are fewer examples due to few activities and space. And it's only getting worse. Today, for many students, the idea of an active sport is attiring oneself in the latest sports clothing with a can of diet coke beside them, SMSing their buddies to come over for a game. When these sports freak buddies appear at the doorstep, they restrict themselves to their room (which for them is their arena or ground) and let their thumbs and fingers kick the ball in a large screen while their feet stay warm and wrapped in cotton Adidas socks, inside Puma shoes. Instead of their boots being torn out by kicking the ball, sadly, it is their X-Box game console which gets worn out due to long hours



Above: Deep blue water. Diving from a height into the pool made me rise higher on the podium. Seen in the photo is me taking part in a diving competition.

Left: The Mace rose higher than any band leader's, and so did my pride. Leading the school band of BPS, Pilani.





Above: 'Like father, like children.' Gaurav and Ashrika Mann leading the Band.  
**'We connected to water like fish.'**  
Swimming was one sport in which my strokes were in perfect harmony with the water, unlike those on the canvas. Also, this was the sport in which we three brothers were equally good. Seen in this photo on left, my brother Late Capt Jawahar Singh Mann.



Above: 'Trial by Fire.' Coming out unscathed and unhurt, forget a student's reputation among his friends. Friends looked up to him and in a sense he became the hero in the group. One of the numerous daredevil acts of fire dives in gymnastics being performed during the 1970 Annual Day functions.





**'Unity and discipline.'**  
Left: NCC cadets marching  
to the tunes of  
'Sarey Jahan Se Accha'.

Below: Medal winners of  
the NCC Armoured Core  
of MS at the Combined  
Annual Training Camp.



religiously devoted to it. Moreover, it's a tragedy that many parents still do not see the real picture. And it only gets gloomier with passing time.

I would like to quote an example of how much a child can do with the stamina one has. In 2006, The Mann School's football team had reached the finals of the famous "Jatin Bedi Memorial Football Tournament" held at St. Stephens College grounds. It is an All India Tournament strictly on invitation basis. MS had to play the final on a Sunday and incidentally on that day the school had its Inter-House Cross Country competition in the early morning. Since the boys had to play the football finals that very day at 2 PM, in all eventuality, the cross country should have been postponed so that the boys would stay fresh and retain all the energy and stamina for the football match. But due to some reason it was not possible to shift the cross country competition to another day. We had to take a decision and we decided that the cross-country be held in the morning. Since I had been through similar situations in my boarding days, where we had to perform many challenges in a day, I knew the boys were tough enough and had the stamina to participate in both the events. We had the cross-country at 7 A.M, where the boys ran 5 kilometres and later went on to participate in the football tournament finals in the afternoon and the result was there for all to see. They won the championship.

Back to my boarding life and back to my days of experiments. Another experiment which I gleefully tried my hands on was theatre. Now you must be thinking that with incidents like 'Summer Blasphemy' and 'Sitar Shot Gun' blowing off the heads of my teachers, would theatre be my last experiment? May be not. For I do not know how well I performed in my experiment with the theatre, when I acted in that famous play 'Jayadrath Vadh' by the noted writer Shri Maithili Charan Gupta, especially enacted for Padamshri G. D. Birla. But I

was so much into that play that I still remember my lines. They were as follows:

*"Hai kaal aab tera nikat, karta anarth pralap kyun?"*

*Jaise baney nij vairion ke pran harna chahiye,*

*Nij marg, niskantak sada saab bhanti karna chahiye"*

(Why do you brag endlessly when you know your end is near and death stares in your face?)

Like our foes, who are none but our own, and, who must be slayed mercilessly

So also, must we like brothers, follow the path of righteousness and harmony.)

Another very memorable role for which I would always be remembered in the School's Dramatics Society is when I played the role of Lord Rama on Dussehra day. I can assure you that it tickled the ribs of the audience, out of laughter. I was in class VI then and young enough to make many mistakes. Being an all-boys school, the role of 'Sita' was played by Anurag Goswami. Dressed in a sari, 'he' did look like 'Sita' (or we were made to believe.) The scene was of the 'golden deer' passing by and Sita demanding Ram to catch the deer for her. Apparently, we couldn't catch a golden deer so we had to make do with another boarder dressed in a deer's costume, running across the stage. Not much of a role for him to jot down in his diary. I presume even Sita's diary would voluntarily skip this particular date since she was another boarder dressed in a sari.

Everything was set. That's what we all thought. The curtain opened and we - Ram, Sita and Laxman - were sitting on the bench covered by a bed sheet instead of a sculptured 24 carat gold seat (We had to be a little realistic since we were in exile.) I, Ram, was supposed to get up from my seat and start chasing the deer. I remembered my part well and so I stood up. Along with me something else rose; the crowd's laughter. I ignored them for a moment but their laughter grew, it grew so loud that even today I can see few tears rolling down, attempting to control their laughter. It was only after a moment I realised, that when I stood up to chase the deer, my dhoti refused to





Above: "Hai kaal ab tera nikat, karta anarth pralap kyun? Jaise baney nij vairion ke pran harna chahiye, nij marg, niskantak sada saab bhanti karna chahiye." Delivering my lines like a veteran actor with a co-actor.  
Opposite: Standing on stage. The entire school watched every move of the actors, and that gave even the veteran actors amongst us the jitters. Seen here, the cast of the famous play 'Jayadrath Vadh' with Padmashree G.D. Birla.



be tricked by that golden deer and sat beside Sita. Just then two hands came out from behind the curtain and grabbed me. I was Like Ravana grabbed Sita and took her away to Lanka, dragged backstage. Stunned and shocked at the audience's behaviour and my abduction from the stage, I could only stare at all the hands and faces desperately trying to wrap a dhoti round my waist. It was then I came to realize, that I was half naked. But

then again before I could react, Mr. Verma, our teacher, and also the director of the play, rearranged my dhoti and pushed me out to conquer that Lanka of audience still wild with laughter. Left with no choice, I continued with the play and justified my role as Ram. I had a long night. I needn't say why.

In spite of all these adventures, the only experiment which I truly loved and still love is swimming. Such is the magic of a hostel, one way or



Left: Images from inter-house drama competition in 1974. Dramas and plays used to be fun in boys' boarding schools as fall female roles used to be played by the boys.





Birla Balika Vidyapeeth, Pilani band at Rajpath on the Republic Day march past. This school has a legacy like no other. It would surprise anyone to know that this school has been participating in the Republic Day parade for the last fifty two years. A very highly commendable feat indeed.

Above Top :1968 Republic Day Parade.

Above: 2006 Republic Day Parade.

the other you land up learning something or the other. Everyone finds the trade they are best at.

Now with all these experiments going haywire, I almost forgot about horse riding. It was one of the most sought after sports for almost everyone in the school. Horse riding is an activity you would find in most of the boarding schools. This is because, compared to a day school, boarding schools possess all the space this particular activity requires. Most of the boarding schools maintain ten to fifteen horses in their stables. You require that number at least for all the students. It is a beautiful, at times furious, and a royal sport at the same time. It adds the cherry to any and every occasion, especially at the Horse Shows put up during Annual Day functions. There were the days when our horse riding team used to participate in the Prime Minister's rally, during the Republic Day celebrations. Speaking of Republic Day celebrations, one very important feature in the march past of bands is the participation of Birla Balika Vidyapeeth's school band. It would surprise everyone to know, that they have been continuously participating in the Republic Day Parade for the past fifty two years. Such achievement by a school band, most importantly by a girl's boarding school, is indeed worth all the respect it commands.

I was in the school's horse riding team and we all used to go for outing on horses, and since Pilani was surrounded by sand dunes, it was fun crossing the dunes like cowboys. Horse riding gave us an elated feeling. It boosted our morale and gave us the confidence, inner strength and a head full of high esteem.

Horse riding, more than the 'Cowboyish' feeling also has a therapeutic value. It's called, 'Equine Therapy,' for children. Medically speaking, the horse's body and motion can stretch and relax the muscles, and riding can also help a child to gain

muscle tone and body strength and improve posture. Equine therapy, like other forms of animal therapy, has emotional benefits, too. A child's connection with an animal and an opportunity to gain horsemanship skills gives a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is another disorder which is present in many children. The cure? Horse riding. It changes an inattentive and impulsive boy on medication, to a responsible and mature one. It does have a medical name too. It's called 'Hippotherapy'. It's a form of therapeutic horse riding that helps overcome physical, cognitive and neurological disorders. It also helps children suffering from Cerebral Palsy, Autism, Dyslexia and Down's syndrome, and adults with multiple sclerosis and also injured soldiers.

Some of the boarding schools which have a reputation for maintaining full-fledged riding clubs are Mayo College, The Scindia School, Gwalior, Punjab Public School, Nabha, The Lawrence School, Lovedale, The Daly College, Indore, The Mann School, Delhi, Motilal Nehru School of Sports, Rai, R.I.M.C, Dehradun, Sainik Schools and Military Schools.

Writing about horses, my memory flashes back to the days of boarding school. More precisely, towards "Kabootri". She was one of the finest mares I had ever seen. Grey she was and sported a wonderful gait. It was a matter of pride for us to ride her and a delight to watch her performing in horse shows. She led the pack and the horse behind her used to maintain a gap of about twenty feet. Good for them because she was also good at kicking. She did active service for about twenty years, from 1967 to 1987. Born in 1962 she lived a good life at school stables and when she died in 1995 (33 years is an exceptionally long life for a horse) every student, including the Old Boys known as VINIANS paid tribute to this fabulous mare.





**'Riding with the wind.'** Holding those reins in my hands gave me a strange feeling. A feeling more of power than excitement. This is one sport, which I still continue to pursue with a zeal unlike any other. Seen here is me crossing a hurdle in one of the horse show jumping competition during my days in the boarding school.



**'With every jump, Kabootri and I rose higher.'** Kabootri was a mare who carved a place for herself in every student's heart. Born in 1962, she lived a good life at Birla Public School, and when she died in 1995 (33 years is an exceptionally long life for a horse), the entire school paid homage to her departed soul.





Horses and boarding schools trot besides each other. Good boarding schools have a stable of thorough bred horses within the campus. This is one activity which every student wants to participate every day.

Considered to be a royal sport, horse riding is thoroughly loved by both boys and girls.

*Left:* The equestrian team of MS.