

St.Patrick's Boarding Life- A Few Reminiscences



By:
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I was ushered into St.Patrick's Boarding Hostel as a fifteen-year-old kid way back in January 1949. As I was a fresher at school, everything was new to me and the first few days were really bitter. Back at home, my younger brother and I would be put up by our father in the mornings and we would move into the two large chairs in the verandah and sit there with our legs couched up until our good old mother served us milk coffee. (All three are deceased now.) Here at the hostel, there was no milk coffee, not even plain tea. Whilst at home, I could take my own time to do my daily routine, whilst here at the hostel I had to do everything according to a schedule right from the time we were put up a the toll of a bell till we retired to bed in the night.

At this time and even more so earlier, St.Patrick's was considered to be a reformatory school for recalcitrant children, especially from those outside the North. Well, I was certainly not one of them and to be fair by the hostellers who were my batchmates, nearly one hundred lodged at the Hindu Boarding, none of them looked recalcitrant at all. There were two hostels the, one adjoining St. Martin's Seminary down Main Street to accommodate Catholic students and the other one down St. Patrick's Road to accommodate Hindu students. This was a three storied modern building and had all the facilities and we were comfortable. Although it was called a Hindu Boarding, a few Catholic students were admitted and I was one of them. We had a good collection of students from different ethnic groups and religions, although the vast majority of them were Hindus. A sizeable number was from outside the North. Those were good old days when we thought little of our ethnicities, and religious differences. We lived, studied, played and mingled together happily.

Some names and incidents, I could well remember. There was Menikdiwela, who was a Senior Prefect. He left soon after I joined the boarding, on completing his HSC, which was a forerunner to the latter day GCE A. Levels. He was one of the first recruits to the District Revenue Officers' Service. In latter days he rose to one of the highest positions in

the Public Service, Secretary to the late President, J.R.Jayewardene. He passed away a few years back. There was Mahroof, from Puttalam, who was an outstanding footballer. He was famous for his corner kicks, most of which would get the ball swerve right into the goal posts and no one needed to head it. . There was Sebastian Peter, a kinsman of mine, who also left soon after I joined. He joined the Railway and qualified as a Mechanical Engineer. He and his family were one of the pioneer immigrants to Canada and are now settled in Montreal. There were the Jayewardene brothers, of whom, Vincent, the junior was an outstanding athlete. Then there were the three brothers from Vavuniya, the eldest of whom became a DRO and the last ending up as a Professor in the University. We had also a very jovial chap from Point Pedro and another from VVT who exhibited his family's opulence openly. We had the physically strong RVA who loved his cadetting. He later joined the Sri Lankan Air Force and became one of its star pilots. There were many others, some of whom had already departed from this world into the world unknown.

One good thing I learnt from boarding life, which I still maintain is my early rise from bed irrespective of the time I go to bed. I also learnt the value of time. Life was quite regulated according to a time schedule from early morning till night. During the weekends, however, there was some relaxation when we could mingle and play around. Also during weekend evenings, we were taken around for a walk, supervised by the Prefects. Normally, the destination would be the Subramaniam Park, the Pannai Jetty, or Beach Road past the town's crematorium.. However, these weekend walks created some turmoil during the time of a new and young warden, hailing from the Continent. Once in a month or even more, with the approval of the Prefects, we would go to Nallur Temple. Hindu boys naturally wanted to worship at the shrine and all of us wanted to have a snack or a good feed at the adjoining restaurants. Someone had leaked these unauthorized outings to the Warden and he was there to greet us with his bi-cycle when we marched into the Temple courtyard next time.. He did not chase us back but came back and found fault with the Prefects. The walks were suspended for some time. Soon thereafter, there was a change of Wardens and the walks resumed and visits to the Nallur Temple were more frequent without any disruption.

We also had boat rides to Mandaitivu, and on one occasion, one of the boys nearly got drowned but was saved by another who could swim well. We did not know of his swimming talent until then.. Cinema was, however, taboo although some of us did manage to scoot off to a Cinema Hall with some false excuses. Once when Father Long was abroad and Father John was acting as a Rector a request was made to allow the hostellers to go to a good Tamil show that was drawing capacity crowds in the town. Father John, after some deliberation, allowed the request but insisted that we go to an English show nearby and not the Tamil one we all preferred. Some of us did go to the English show but I wonder whether Father John ever knew that the kissings and cuddlings in that show were worse than anything contained in any Tamil show. I was told that after I left College in 1952, the hostellers were allowed to attend selected cinema shows more frequently.

Whenever the College participated in sports activities like soccer and cricket, we would always be taken out and told that we must cheer not merely our teams but the opposing ones too, if they performed well.

The quality of food served to us was very much wanting at the time I joined but improved afterwards and there was no room to complain. There was also a Rediffusion set in the dining hall from which we used to hear cricket commentaries

Soon after I left College, there was a Passion Play staged in the college grounds, which drew a massive crowd from the Peninsula. I had the feeling that, I would probably have been in the cast had I stayed in the College for a few more weeks.

When I joined the hostel, the Warden was Father TAJM who passed away only a couple of years back in his nineties. He was strict and maintained some distance with the hostellers. One evening he looked exceedingly delighted and we were wondering why. He called all the hostellers and gladly announced that the Holy See had appointed the first native from the North as the next Bishop of Jaffna, Rt. Rev. Emilianus Pillai. He was more than happy because both he and the selected Bishop hailed from the Islands of Kayts..

Then there were frequent changes of Wardens; we had two young priests from the Continent and some elders too. When I left College in April 1952, there was Father N, an elderly and kind-hearted priest. Hostellers from the Peninsula were given one weekend in a month to visit their homes, but this priest was good enough to grant me permission to go home every weekend to visit my sick mother who was paralyzed after a stroke. The following incident took place during this Warden's time.

It was winter time and getting up 5.15 a.m. was really agonizing but, get up, we must, unless we are really sick whence we must move to the infirmary. We go down to do our ablutions come back to the dormitory and the entire Non-Catholics move to the study hall while the Catholic students go the Chapel nearby to hear Holy Mass. Then all proceed to the College grounds opposite to participate in a physical training schedule for which hostellers from the Catholic hostel in the newly built adjoining building will also join. This is compulsory for all except or those who are sick. While the majority of the boarders followed the laid down schedule and reported to the study hall after the morning ablutions, a few followed a different routine. There was a room at the very end, quite unnoticed and they would sneak into this room and steal a few more minutes of sleep, squatting on the floor. Then they would do their ablutions and creep into the study hall. The Prefects were aware of this but ignored it. However, one fine day, when it was quite dark inside this room, someone appeared, clothed entirely in black. The entry of this visitor was greeted by a loud shout by one, Oh, there is a 'devil' in Tamil. Before the visitor could identify the culprits, all had vanished. The visitor was none other than the Warden, short and rotund wearing his all black cassock but he certainly did not look like a devil. The culprits were awaiting an admonishment, maybe a more severe punishment like public caning. Downright scared, they waited and waited but nothing happened. The warden merely ordered the room to be closed. He was really a very kind hearted priest.

During my stay at the hostel, there was only one unsavory incident, which I want to record. I have elsewhere referred to a hosteller from VVT who would exhibit his opulence. One of his exhibits was a thick gold chain round his neck. However this soon disappeared and we came to know that the Warden had not approved his wearing this ornament. So he had removed and put it in a trunk, kept under his bed in the dormitory. He would always keep the trunk padlocked but there were occasions when he had overlooked to do so. One fine day he found the chain missing. He reported the loss to the Warden and all hell was let loose. Except during prescribed times, no one was allowed into the dormitory and the keys were available with the prefects only. The suspicion naturally centered on the prefects but they were ruled out as they were all considered completely above board. . The investigations did not reveal anything and soon afterwards we found the Police personnel coming and taking fingerprints. Again nothing happened for weeks. Rumours started to float implicating two seniors but these two individuals moved about as normally as earlier. Then there were the end of term holidays and everyone went home. When we came back, we found these two hostellers missing. Apparently the punishment had been meted out secretly and we never heard about them afterwards. What shocked us however was another senior, a much liked and friendly hosteller also did not turn up. Whether his non-return had anything to do with this incident, we never knew.

There were music sessions, where Baila songs would hold sway. St.Patrick's Day , March 17th would always be remembered for real jollity and the special food we would be provided with. We could play the whole day without getting into the study hall.

I could write more but space does not allow me. In short, we had fun, we had pun, and we had all the seasons in the sun. Hail ! Glorious St. Patrick's.

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