

Irrepressible Youth - The Reminiscences Of Amar Singh College Years

Amar Singh College was a big college lying on the south-west of Srinagar, It is close to Wazir Bagh and Amira Kadal and on one end and Jehlum river flood canal on the other.

Amir Kadal has been the 5th Ave. of Srinagar for generations and will continue to do so till

Suburban development in Srinagar comes of age.

But the college was considered a few notches lower to S.P. College,

The third college of its day in the city.

Amar Singh College was equipped with sprawling grounds

Wrapped in suburban dignity and tranquility.

In fifties when I was a student there the college atmosphere was highly conservative:

Students were keenly deferential to professors and subservient to management.

Only in the college tuck-shop and the playgrounds their inhibitions melted.

Education was nothing but passing of the exams,

Sports were not a hot attraction then

And girls were more an idea than reality.

But with all its unsophistication it was still fun to be there.

Prof. J.N. Dhar taught physics with a tyrannical control of the classroom.

He threw temper tantrums at will.

He could throw a student out of the classroom for the slippage from the expected competence or etiquette.

One day he doused a student's head with cold water to make him behave better;

Another day when a student tried to defend himself against the professor's accusations in studied English,

He retorted back, "I need an explanation and not literature."

But he knew what he was teaching.

Prof. Nand Lal Darbari was a senior professor of chemistry

But a popular butt of jokes due to his comic appearance and handling of things.
Once when Principal Mahmood Ahmed had to go on a vacation,
Due to his seniority, Prof. Durbari had to fill in, something he did not like to do.
Among the very first tasks he had to perform as an Acting Principal
Was to approve a long absence from college application from a student.
The student arrived with the application in his office and explained
The reason for his request, which was his sister's marriage.
Prof. Durbari was annoyed that he was the one who had to handle such a request
And told the student, "Did your sister have to get married when I am an Acting
Principle?"

Another time Prof. Durbari arrived in the class after an absence of a week,
Due to his son's marriage. He sat on the table, with legs dangling, in his
customary manner.
A student shouted at him, asking what was the menu at his son's marriage
reception.
Prof. Darbari went through the list of the items on the menu
And when he finished reading the item gulabjamun,
The student slammed back, "Professor, you look like a gulabjamun."
Ever since the nickname gulabjamun stuck.

Prof. Yusuf Jandugar taught physics,
He was flamboyant, unsophisticatedly straight, and authoritarian.
He was thin like a reed, tall, and wore a pagadi.
Explaining make and break positions of an electrical device
He would elaborate on the make position of the device at one wall of the
classroom
And then walk to the opposite wall to explain its changing to the break position.
When he spoke, students listened with complete attention,
Because of the absolute fear they had of him.
He told the class one day that it was alright to swindle, as long as it was for a
large sum of money.
To escape the handcuffs all one had to do is hire an expensive lawyer from
England.

Prof. J.N. Kaul taught English.
Though he was of small-build he was feared.
He used to wear a Gandhi cap and limped in one leg.

He gave us a class, on a certain day of the week, at 9:00 A.M. -

It was the first class of the day.

On this particular day he was running late.

All the students were waiting for him on the second floor verandah,

From where there was a clear view of the college bicycle shed,

Where he was going to park his bicycle.

Lo and behold he could be sighted,

Pumping his bicycle pedals furiously.

As he reached the bicycle shed, he quickly alighted from the bicycle,

Swiftly giving it to the shed attendant.

Then he strode, like a tiger, toward the college building.

As the momentum of his stride increased, his sight became very compelling.

Suddenly, I heard some students singing, badta chal, badta chal, taroon ke hath pakdta chal.....

This was a refrain from a song of a popular movie, Boot Polish (?),

But as soon as he reached close to the building, the students suddenly stopped singing.

I have another memory of Prof. J.N.Kaul:

Just before his class it was announced that Sadarariyast Karan Singh was in the process

Of making a surprise visit to the college.

Prof. warned us to be ready for it.

Lo and behold Karan Singh with his entourage entered our class.

He had a big smile on his face and asked the professor about what we were studying.

Then he asked him who was the shining star of his class.

I felt nervous as I thought I was that person.

To my utter shock the professor just beat about the bush for a few moments

And then announced that there was no shining star in his class.

I could not forgive him for that.

Later, I realized why he did not indicate who the best student was:

It was because of the fear that the best student might have tripped Karan Singh's questions,

Thereby, blemishing professor's image.

Prof. Gupta (?) would dress immaculately, was well mannered, and a bachelor.

He taught us chemistry.

He was famous for his statement on why he remained a bachelor:

Jab dood milta hai, gai lane ki kya zaroorat hai.

In English it means: when you are assured of a supply of milk, why buy a cow.

Prof. Yousuf taught us Charles Dickens' A Tale Of Two Cities.

He would read the text verbatim in his terrible pronunciation:

He pronounced the character Larry as Lorry, the Kashmiri word for a bus.

After reading every few lines he would warn us: mark humor, mark drama, mark action,...

Because of the shortage of the girls each girl was special.

God has bestowed on us three at one time.

Indu Raina and Sheela Thussu, Roll Numbers 8 and 303, were my classmates.

Indu was tall and well-built, while Sheela was slender and of common proportions.

The former was moderately sociable, while the latter was properly so,

Within the social taboos of the age.

Each day boys would keenly wait for them to arrive in the class

And examine them top to bottom for their attires and moods.

Their smiles were our happinesses; their grey moods were our sorrows.

I nicknamed Sheela, three-not-three, based on her roll number,

Which stuck somewhat.

One day Abdul Ahad, physics demonstrator, called me to his desk,

Just at the beginning of our physics lab.

I was smitten with fear for it was unusual to be called like that.

Abdul Ahad told me that since Sheela Thussu had called sick

I would have to partner with Indu Raina in the experiment as apparatuses were limited.

I became very nervous with the thought of spending eight hours with a girl

In front of the whole class and the demonstrator.

Within seconds the entire class came to know of my situation;

Boys threw mischievous smiles on me,

For they thought I was in for a great time for the rest of the day.

I was unable to tell them that I was feeling miserable.

Within minutes Indu and I had to stand in front of

The sound velocity measurement by the tuning fork method apparatus.

Indu was taking the lead and I was coyly following her.

Hours passed and we were not getting any results.

It was clear to me, and I guess to her, that our nervousnesses were the culprits.

Boys inundated me with comments suggesting what a lucky bum I was.

They would not take my assertions of the horrible time I was having.

After the break we resumed our work with lesser nervousness and obtained some good results.

At the end of the day we were relieved that the torture was over -

The quality of our work was inconsequential.

After some days I felt that in spite of the torture I had experienced

The experience had some sublimity to it -

A romantic languor hung over me for months.

One day the news came that Sheela was ill and would be away from college for a long time:

She never returned.

The teaching and the whole architecture of preparing students for higher studies was preposterous.

Classroom lectures were mostly professorial monologues,

Mechanically listened to by the students,

While their hearts and minds were focused on something else.

They knew that all they had to do to pass the exam was

To start opening the books just three months before the exams.

So, why should they put effort to understand and retain what was being taught now.

Going to college to learn was a big sham: one could have easily stayed home and learnt more.

The education system was a grand cultural fraud, perpetuated from generation to generation.

Students just crammed the likely materials questioned in the exams,

To just pass the exams, which was done to get the jobs.

There was no learning and no character building.

Preparing for exams, which would fall during the two month winter vacation,

Was the highest ordeal of studying.

Students would mug and mug during days and parts of the nights.

Some would get up at 4:00 AM to study.

If overpowered by sleep they would douse their heads under a cold tap.

Understanding the subject material was less important than its memorizing. Students would turn into memory machines. Families would get fully involved with the enterprise. They would see to it that teas, meals, kangaris, etc. were provided. To get a relief from stress students would refresh themselves by taking walks. By the examination time the stress level would have risen very high. In my neighborhood a boy from a milk-seller family almost suffered a breakdown: His appearance and talk changed as the exams approached.

Fridays were half-days due to Muslims' need to go to a mosque. A few willful students would make rounds of their friend circle and ask for two paisas, which was all they said they needed to complete the Seven-and-half annas they needed to buy a third-class movie ticket. Many friends would spare two paisas, as this meager amount would let their friend see a movie, which was the highest level entertainment available those days. Later we would find that the boys did not have any money at all to begin with - By collecting fifteen two paisas they would realize their dream, using mendacious means.

There used to be four girls studying in our rival college, S.P. College. Boys had nicknamed them: Badal, Garja, Bijli, and Chamki, keyed to their personalities.

Which in English mean: Cloud, Thunder, Lightning, and Flash.

When I was in the third year Chamki moved to our college, To the great excitement of the boys.

There were two other girls who also moved to our college from somewhere.

They came with their nicknames, Chunnu and Munnu.

I ran for some election in the third-year student body,

For which I had to canvass, including flesh-pressing.

But my acute shyness prevented me from approaching Chunnu and Munnu.

The loss of two votes in this close election was crucial but my hands were tied.

But toward the end of the canvassing period I was surprised to see the two girls Approach me, while I was standing in a verandah.

I became nervous, not knowing how to handle myself,

But there was no way I could run away from the impending encounter.

Confrontation finally happened. Chunnu, the petite, slightly chubby girl, my

favorite out of the two,

After looking around to make sure no one was watching us, told me that they were going to vote for me.

My excitement at this, mixed with my agitated nervousness, made me just blabber a thank you.

Chunnu emboldened by delivering her message and seeing my nervousness, next asked me

If I needed anything else from her?

Hearing this from her my eyes almost popped out.

I tried to tell Chunnu what I wanted from her but my voice choked and my hands started to tremble.

Looking at my utter misery the girls gave me a tantalizingly mischievous smile and walked away from me.

I vowed to myself right then that I would never again run for an election which would have a women electorate;

And I have kept that promise.

F.Sc. practical exam in chemistry was under way:

There was a lot of tension because here was a test

Where mugging could do only so much.

Results had to be produced under the eyes of the examiner

And then one had to go through viva voce with him.

My examiner was Prof. Nasserullah, a very handsome, well-dressed, and friendly guy.

I did not do badly in the experiment but my shyness was a block I had to negotiate in the viva.

To my utter shock Prof. Nasserullah's first question to me was: which was my latest movie?

After easily answering that question, his next question was: who was my favorite actress?

Emboldened by the answer to the first question I did not mind saying that it was Madhubala -

An answer I would not have normally given because of my shyness and inhibitions of the times,

As Madhubhala was a sexy woman.

That was the end of the viva, there were no technical questions.

I was relieved beyond my imagination.

In the evening my uncle by chance met the professor during the after-office stroll
in Amira Kadal,
And asked him how I fared in the exam;
The professor replied that I was very nervous but there was nothing to be worried
about.

Physics practical exam was easier;
Someone in my family, without informing me,
Informed Prof. Triloki Nath Kilam, the examiner,
That I would be taking an exam under him.
Prof. Kilam and we were relatives.
Following day in the lab the tensions were expectedly high.
We waited anxiously as Prof. Kilam walked into the lab:
He was good looking, properly-dressed, and under pressure.
After a few moments he walked across the lab and in his famous
Way of peering over his glasses, whispered in my ears: are you Zind Lal Kaul's
son?
After I nodded he abruptly broke away from me.
Rest of the time in lab was just going through the exam.
But when the results came, I was just awarded about twenty-some marks out of
the forty -
A very mediocre rating; it was clear to me that my relative had not given me any
bonus
Because of our relationship.

The college tuck shop was a buzz of excitement:
Students smoking, drinking tea, talking uninhibitedly about girls and professors.
There was also talk about movies and politics.
Overcome by the good time they were having,
Many times students would cut their classes.
But the image of the tuck shoppers was bad;
They were considered poor students, drop-outs, irresponsible, and low-level.
And, of course, it was off-limits to girls.

The grounds at the college were open, smooth, serene, and semi-secluded.
Many an hour have I spent looking at them and the associated horizon,
To escape the humbug and the clamor of the world;
They gave me much needed enchanted loneliness.

Friends would sit down under a chinar and survey the universe;
We savored moments of delicious gossip and searing conversation.
I spent innumerable hours playing cricket here.
Many classes in summer and early fall would be outdoors, on the grounds.
If there was only one thing I was allowed to remember about the college,
It would be the life on its grounds.

With all the mediocrity of the education provided at the college,
There was still a music ringing in one's soul:
Of the majesty of life, the wonder of nature, the beckoning of the unknown.
Life appeared infinitely rich - an enterprise conceived by the gods;
It seemed to be a calling of very high magnitude,
Everything was touched by grandeur,
Everything was eternal.
With all the life that has flown down since
Nothing has matched the magic of those years.

Suffern, N.Y.

12.6.09