

Along with our gang, there were three other familiar faces in the Meiktila Company.

The hefty and serious Jat, Shamsheer Chand – a.k.a. Mooli – named after the root vegetable for many reasons, was an uncomplicated but obstinate fellow. Once he got stuck on an issue, no argument, however sane, could untangle the knots in his head. From an early age, Mooli had veered towards brawn, giving a wide berth to anything that required the exercise of brain. The Jat was a loyal friend and proved to be an ideal companion if one could avoid getting into an argument or a brainy discussion with him.

The most lethal mix was Maachh and Mooli in a boiling cauldron. When and if they got into a squabble, it was safer to remain no closer than a kilometre away from the duo.

Sabby, the fun-loving Punjabi, a show-off and a braggart, was next. His only pastime was to ogle girls. Age didn't matter to him. Any woman between the age of 12 and 50 could occupy his mind for a reasonable period of time. Material pursuits were Sabby's mainstay. Intellectual goals were absolutely insignificant. Although not a handsome fellow in the strictest terms, he was passable when smartly attired. Since he did have an impressive wardrobe and a big collection of after shave lotions, it was not too difficult to attract the opposite sex. Or so we thought.

His mastery over the national language, sprinkled with a few couplets in Urdu, could make women swoon. Sabby was justly proud of his knowledge of Bollywood, and excelled in parroting dialogues from the latest blockbusters. All this added up to a fairly impressive personality as far as some girls were concerned. For long, Maachh had tried to replicate Sabby's skill without much success. The couplets that the Punju could recite flawlessly sounded comical when repeated by the Bong in a hilarious accent.

And then, there was 'Makkhi' Sharma, the guy who held the record of having won every single boxing bout, in the makkhi (fly) weight category, at the NDA. Makkhi was immune to every distraction. Single-minded in the pursuit of a boxing championship, he had decided to defer all other matters for a later date. He was obsessed with the sport. Be it diet, exercise, or reading – everything was

aimed towards bettering his punch. ‘Knockout’ was the only word in his dictionary.

Women, pranks, movies... nothing could sidetrack the guy. The only concession he made was to music. Makkhi’s collection of music was every cadet’s envy.

Each of these guys was a character beyond description, with funny quirks and foibles. The pseudonyms were just an extension of their personality.

It was as though nothing had changed since the days at the NDA; only the set-up was different. Here we were, looking forward to another session of high-grade training designed to turn us into loyal and brave soldiers. Together, we had metamorphosed from lanky teenagers into lean, mean fighting machines at the NDA.

It was a perfect morning as we chatted and back-slapped each other, ribald jokes pepping up our spirits. Truth be told, we were kicking up quite a ruckus when the door to the room on my right opened; the very same room on which the nameplate read ‘Joseph Rodrigues’.

He entered the scene like a hero. Throwing us a serious look, he strutted closer and held out his hand.

One by one, we shook his proffered hand, grimacing over the hard clasp. The chap was a hefty six footer with a body like Dharmendra. A mop of tight curls clasped his scalp like an ardent lover; the once fair skin was sunburnt with constant exposure. His sharp features made him look like a film star. The macho aura he exuded was enough to calm us down. The thin moustache went well with the ruggedly-handsome features. With a nose, broken – probably during a boxing bout – he looked tough yet vulnerable. He didn’t walk; he glided majestically. We gaped reverently.

We belonged to rival camps. We, from the NDA, considered ourselves elites and superior to the likes of Rodrigues, who was a direct entry (DE) into the IMA. While we had gone through three years of military training, the direct entrants had graduated from various colleges and opted for the army. Unlike those from the NDA, who entered the third term directly and trained for two terms at the IMA, the DEs had to undergo four terms of training.

The rivalry between the two groups was legendary. While the DEs thought that

they were more educated, the NDA cadets took pride in their six terms of professional training.

The sole advantage the NDA cadets had over the fresh entrants was that they were a large group and already shared a steel-strong bond, while the direct entrants operated in the solo till they formed their gangs. In fact, the entire lot of cadets coming to the IMA from NDA were my course mates. We were 170 in number and that made us a majority group amongst the 350 odd Gentlemen Cadets in our batch.

After exchanging pleasantries, Joe sauntered off to his room. As soon as his door clicked shut, we began venting our opinions about the guy.

‘Some body, that!’ remarked Sandy, who had long been working out to attain a six pack and managed just four. He sucked in his belly and examined himself. ‘I would love to get those muscles.’

‘He looks cool, man,’ said Makkhi, who considered himself an expert on the subject. Though puny of body, the fly prided himself on his vast knowledge of muscle-matters. ‘One day I want to have a body like Joe’s,’ he sighed.

‘What confidence!’ I added.

‘Must not have got a job in the Civvy Street, so he decided to join the army,’ was Maachh’s acrid opinion. ‘He is not in the same league as us so I don’t think we should give him undue importance.’

Clearly, the Fish was jealous of Joe’s physique and would spare no effort to run him down.

As expected, Porky agreed, ‘Yeah, I am sure of that. That body has come from many months of having nothing to do except juggling weights.’

‘Such show-offs should be banned from joining the army.’

‘I agree, totally.’

‘Shut up you morons! He has an impressive personality and that’s that,’ came Sandy’s rebuke. ‘I know of guys who would give their right arm for a body like that and you know it, too.’

Sandy's statement silenced both Maachh and Porky, but only for the moment.