

TWELVE



As the weeks flew by, we found ourselves in distinguished company. Along with hundreds of Indian cadets, two dozen foreign cadets began training with us. In our Company was a chap who was some kind of prince from Tonga, and had a tongue twister for a name. We called him Jomo for convenience. Then there was Chinouyazue from Zambia and Lehloenya from some unfamiliar country called Lesotho. Since the names didn't roll easy on our tongues, we called them Chin and Leh.

Their hold on the Queen's language was a bit precarious, and they believed in the maxim – silence is golden. Nods were aplenty, though. A sideways nod meant 'no', and a vertical nod meant 'yes'. Where the nods didn't work, their wide smiles definitely did.

Communication between the three and the ustaads was impossible, since they had no knowledge of Hindi. Most ustaads kept out of their way, which was a happy situation for the trio as no tasks were assigned to them. Expectation was low and punishment was an unfamiliar word. They certainly would never hear the word 'relegation', we knew. All the academy had to do was to train these guys (to the best of their capability), commission them, and send them back to where they belonged. Their training was a bit of formality, we felt. On their part, the three foreigners tried their best to keep up with the others.

One morning, while we were going through our WT (weapon training) classes, Maachh was in one of his mutinous moods.

'I am not going to do anything today,' he declared. The guy had been on the receiving end the entire morning. After having had to run around the huge playground twice, with his weapon on his shoulder, he had strained some tendons and was in pain.

'GC, dhyan kidhar hai?' Ustaad Jung Bahadur bellowed.

The ustaad had been posted recently to the academy, so he was not yet familiar with our faces or names.

Twice the ustaad shouted at Maachh, and twice the Bong ignored him. We knew his goose was cooked when we saw a very angry instructor marching towards our pal.

‘Kyoon? Sunayee nahin deta?’ the ustad asked. His tone was unmistakable and everyone knew that Maachh was in trouble but the Bong continued to behave in a pig-headed manner. He stood up and gave a moronic look in reply to the ustad’s question.

Fearing dreadful consequences, Zora stood up. His ever-fertile brain had come up with an idea.

‘Ustad, yeh Malaysian cadet hai,’ he said with his most solemn expression.

Taking the cue from him, Sandy stood up and added, ‘Isse Hindi nahi aati hai. Yeh aapki baat nahin samajh sakta hai.’

A few snorts at the back were quickly muffled. Tension rose as everyone waited for the ustad’s reaction.

With a deadpan expression, Maachh nodded his head vigorously up and down, side to side, imitating the Zambian chap. Our bellies ached with suppressed laughter. The ustad threw an exasperated look at Maachh and walked away.

For the next one week, the ustad let Maachh enjoy his leisure while the rest of us slogged. The wily chap was exempted from all kinds of duties and punishments, much to his delight.

‘What bliss! This is the life,’ he declared, lolling around on his bed with a plateful of banana chips by his side. ‘Not knowing the language certainly has its benefits. I would love to become a Zambian to earn these perks.’

The charade couldn’t last forever. Doubting his credentials, the ustad had been sneaking up to him at unexpected moments. To Maachh’s misfortune, one morning, the suspicious ustad stole up behind him while the Bong was busy abusing Porky in chaste Hindi.

Unaware of the instructor’s presence, Maachh caught Porky by the scruff of his neck and said – ‘Saale, tu mujhe ulloo bana raha hai?’

Not even Porky’s furious eye rolling could alert the Fish of the impending danger.

The burly instructor, who was standing behind the two, landed a solid thump on

Maachh's shoulder.

'Saale...' Still using colourful language, Maachh turned and found himself staring into the furious ustaad's face. What followed was a string of punishments that had the Bong sweating through the week.

It wasn't just the WT ustaad who became Maachh's enemy. At the NDA, he had managed to set a record by earning the wrath of almost every instructor, and now he seemed to be keen on setting a similar kind of record at the IMA. Time and again, he rubbed the ustaads the wrong way.

Not long after his 'Malaysian' episode, Maachh proved his talent at needling the ustaads, once again.

It had been a long night for us. The night exercise had lasted till the wee hours of the morning, and most of us had not been able to grab our forty winks. Almost everyone was groggy, and Maachh was in a grumpy mood. A sleepless night had done nothing to improve things.

As we walked towards the huge ground where the classes were scheduled under the massive banyan tree, we grumbled and let off our steam. 'I am going to catch some sleep at the back,' Maachh announced even before the start of the morning training session.

We occupied the squad posts that had been set up under the tree. A single word had been scrawled across the chalkboard – 'Chaal'.

The ustaad arrived spruced up and smart, refreshed after a good night's sleep while we stared bleary-eyed at the blackboard. He then proceeded to straighten the blackboard, and stood at attention between the board and the table while we watched him with as much earnestness as our sleep-deprived brain cells permitted. With dramatic deliberation, he looked at the board, seeming to study the words written on it.

Finally, having finished his inspection, he was ready for the lesson. He drew in a deep breath and asked pompously, 'Cadet, soche aur bataien, aaj ka lesson kya hai?'

A moron could have answered the question. It was there right in front of us, written in block letters on the chalkboard, but we decided to play along.

The ustad paused dramatically near Sandy and asked: ‘Gentleman Cadet, you tell.’

‘Chaal,’ he said, eager to get back to his snooze.

‘How many types of walks can you name?’

‘Bhed chaal,’ came the tongue-in-cheek reply from Sandy.

Although dying to break into laughter, we managed to maintain a serious expression.

‘Takreeban theek, sit down.’

Next, the ustad pounced on Mooli, ‘Aap batayen?’

‘Murgi chaal.’

‘Takreeban theek, baith jayen.’

‘Morni chaal,’ the reply came from Zora. He also imitated a peacock walk for added effect.

Makkhi said, ‘Battak chaal,’ mimicking a duck’s waddle quite skilfully, much to everyone’s amusement. His attempt at doublespeak didn’t escape the cadets.

Deer walk, crow walk, duck walk, elephant walk... imagination sprouted wings as answers flew thick and fast from the GCs, who were looking for a bit of laughter.

The ustad, despite silly replies, tried to maintain his equanimity. To his credit, the ustad never declared any answer as wrong. His ‘takreeban theek’ was geared towards motivating the cadets. He was practicing his own version of a brainstorming technique.

After having asked a couple of questions, the ustad shrugged and strode back to the table, pretending to be exasperated with our stupidity. His strategy had not succeeded in extracting the correct answer.

‘Gentlemen Cadets, today, we will learn different types of chaal, meaning walk,’

he announced in broken English to a tittering group. ‘Note please, no bhed chaal here,’ he declared pompously. ‘We will not do duck walk, elephant walk, or crow walk. We are soldiers and we will learn the soldier walk.’

He then took us through the different kinds of walks that could be adapted to suit different terrains and situations. There were the day walks when the light was bright and vision clear, depending on whether one was carrying weapons or not. Then there were the night walks when vision was limited due to total darkness. He took us through the descriptions of the monkey walk, cat walk, leopard crawl, and ghost walk. The ustaad used Hindi words to describe these walks, so monkey walk translated into bandar chaal, leopard crawl was cheetah chaal, and cat walk was billi chaal. The funniest one was the ghost walk which was referred to as bhoot chaal.

‘The Ghost who walks,’ muttered Zora, under his breath. Then, carrying the joke forward, he raised his hand and asked – ‘Sahab, aapne bhoot chal bataya lekin bhavishya chaal kaisa hota hai?’

Clearly, he was using the words bhoot and bhavishya to mean the past and present, while it meant a ‘ghost’ in the current context.

The ustaad muttered – ‘Nonsense cadet!’

Maintaining his solemn expression, the instructor refused to be drawn into an argument and continued with his lecture on the subject.

After taking us through the different kinds of walks adopted in various situations, the ustaad picked up a GC to demonstrate the walk.

It so happened that Maachh, seated in a corner, slept peacefully in an upright sitting position, his eyes half open. It was only because he was not snoring that the ustaad failed to catch him in the act. After Sandy had demonstrated the bandar chaal quite effectively, it was Porky’s turn to do the bhoot chaal.

With a flourish, he raised one leg high up from the ground, stretched out his arms, put the leg down with deliberation and lifted the other leg, all the while pretending to be groping blindly in the dark. After all, this was a walk to be adopted in a pitch dark environment. It was a perfect parody of a ghost walk. The assembled cadets roared with laughter.

The ustad appreciated his efforts rather half-heartedly. This was not the ghost walk he desired his pupils to emulate.

He then went on to pick on his favourite prey. Maachh had earned the trainer's wrath a few weeks back for some minor offence or the other.

'GC Mitra, uthe and dikhaye ki billi chaal kaise kiya jaata hai,' barked the instructor.

Maachh, who had slept all through the class, had not heard a word of the lecture and knew nothing about the kinds of walks the ustad had taken us through. His brain was as blank as the sheet in his notebook, the fellow stood up and looked around for a cue.

'Cat walk,' whispered Porky, helpfully.

'Don't worry, I can do a perfect catwalk,' Maachh hissed back.

Grinning and confident, Maachh went on demonstrate the only catwalk he knew. Executing the perfect imitation of a ramp walk, the guy walked with mincing steps around the tree, much to the delight of everyone. Clad in his uniform, the giraffe-like neck held high, chest thrust out, pelvis swivelling, the Bong walked as though he was wearing the latest couture creation. Only the music was missing. It was too much of an effort to stifle our laughter. Loud guffaws echoed across the grounds even as the ustad fumed.

'GC, sawdhan!' he roared.

The poor Maachh didn't know what hit him. To the best of his knowledge he had just done a perfect cat walk, which would have elicited wolf whistles from a discerning audience. Instead, he had an irate ustad ordering him to run around the ground with the rifle held high over his head.

'Some people can never appreciate a good thing,' he muttered, 'Morons!' Sighing, he began jogging.