DOWN MEMORY LANE – *initiation*

A K Ojha – 1965 (mining)

“Are you enjoying the snow flakes at Simla?”

I could not answer this simple question. I was not enjoying. I was sweating profusely. I could not see any sign of snow flakes anywhere outside; nor was its absence unexpected. I was several hundred kilometres away from Simla. But I was supposed to be at Simla and was expected to behave that way. The group so much bothered for my enjoyment was unlikely to take my straight answer kindly. My predecessor is presently relaxing in *‘murga’* pose in the corner for his refusal to endorse whatever the group had said.

Perhaps, I should explain. This was the first Sunday of July, 1961. The School was to open next day. I was standing on the top slab of a wall rack trying to stick my neck out through the ventilator of an Upper Barracks hostel room. I and some other Freshers have been summoned to this room to be introduced to ‘seniors’. My background of having passed out from Rama Krishna Mission Vidya Mandir drew loud sneers from the seniors. It was unanimously decided that I was a fit case for Simla visit. Some one asked me to climb up the wall rack and sweetly explained that I could see Simla through the ventilator. Having no courage to decline the invitation, I hoisted myself up and looked outside. Sensing the mood of the Group, I meekly replied in the affirmative to their query about Simla. I hardly suspected that the innocent prank of imagine-you-are-at-Simla was only the introduction of the more sinister phase.

“Peep out and you can see a beautiful young lady in her birthday suit. Please describe her”. Oh, God! How to reply? A sixteen year old lad with R K Mission culture does not know how to satisfy the jeering seniors without offending his own sensibility and avoid doing a *‘murga*’. He did what he had learnt. Pray for getting him out of this trouble. The prayer was immediately answered. One of the popular seniors, Dilip Mukherjee (Kanu to his innumerable friends), who developed some fancy for me and had assumed the role of my local guardian, stepped in as my saviour. In his typical hot language, he went on describing the anatomy in details and questioning me (‘do you see the dimpled cheeks, waiting to be kissed?’ and such other items, southward). All I had to do was to blush and nod. Kanu-da and some other seniors helped many freshers this way.

I had no idea of ragging till the rickshaw puller taking me from the bus stand to the School did a bit of marketing. He advised me not to worry much about ragging and take his rickshaw any time in the night to the Railway Station Apparently, during the mass ragging and some other nights, many first year students fled to the safety of station platforms. I could only understand that some problem was lurking. Sure enough, it came to the open almost immediately I reached the Tank shop hostel. Seniors were waiting not only to greet us, but also to take us with them to familiarise with the campus.

We lived a fearful lot in the first few days. Always scared that some senior would come and demand something, there would be a rush to the toilets when there was some noise indicating a group entering Tank Shop. It is only at the School building that we felt protected, knowing fully well that seniors can not do anything other than passing some instructions like ‘see me at Room no. 230 precisely at 05 47 this evening’. Ragging was officially banned. The Director, Prof. D N Prasad told us the same on the first day with advice to make a complaint to him in case some senior dares to indulge in this. However, no body ever made any complaint. There was instruction that we must salute all seniors. So the practice was to open the room door and salute, often before the visitor’s entry. Ramu dhobi was quite embarrassed when he came for retuning clothes and found the student saluting him with eyes closed!

We had with us Raj Kumar Khurja, - quite older than me, having worked for a few years as an Instructor in an UP college (we had no age limit for admission). He was very fair and handsome. A lovingly nurtured sparkling handlebar moustache added glamour to his impressive personality. Seniors caught hold of him and made him shave off one side. They threatened him of dire consequences in case he shaved the other half within a week. So what could poor Raj Kumar do other than shedding silent tears for his departed whiskers? He started moving everywhere covering his face, nose southwards, with a big handkerchief. One evening he suddenly came across Prof Prasad. The Director was taking his routine rounds to curb ragging in the hostels. A very generous heart, Prof Prasad was touched by Raj Kumar’s plight. He thought that the boy had caught severe cold and advised him to go to Dr. Col. Mitra and take medicines before it complicates. Suddenly somebody giggled. Then there was a collective hushed giggle. Prasad frowned. Friends do not giggle when one of them is suffering. He sensed something foul and demanded an explanation. Raj Kumar was compelled to reveal his secret. With difficulty Prasad checked his smile. He had sense enough to understand the matter. “Who were these boys? Do you know any of them?” We knew many of them (possibly the Director also suspected the culprits). But we did not reveal. “Go, and shave the other half. And, this is MY instruction.”

I was very uneasy and nervous. Secluded environment in Belur Math did not prepare me for adapting to this situation. On my first day in the classes six seniors asked me separately to their rooms exactly at 06 10 PM. The rooms were in different hostels. Naturally, I did not go anywhere. By 06 15 all six descended to the hostel and demanded my explanation for disobeying. It was drizzling. They asked me to run to Upper Barracks hostel and come back in TWO minutes. I had no option but to start running. A little ahead I spotted the comforting sight of a cycle rickshaw. I hailed it and went straight to a relative’s house in the colony. He was an Instructor in Physics Dept. I told him that I would leave the School and go to take admission in Physics Hons. in the Presidency College, Calcutta. That was my personal choice, anyway. Mr. Upadhyaya, my relative, simply told, “Everyone will think that you ran away since you could not cope with pressure of Mining course. It never serves to run away from a problem rather than facing it. These seniors are good boys. They may be playing prank, but they wish you well. You shift to my house for a week or so and return to the hostel after the things calm down.” He went with me to the hostel to get my things.

From next day, many seniors came to me and advised me not to get perturbed and continue. Even the most dreaded senior, Kewal Singh, spoke to me and asked me not to be ridiculous. (Years later, when working together at Mosaboni, I found out how kind hearted and helping a person Kewal was. I remember him stroking my head and giving me lime leaves at the dead of night some party night in Longtom Hostel when I took half-a-dozen pegs too many and became sick!)

As the days passed I found out that most of the seniors were very cooperative and always available for guidance. Whether it was understanding of some course material or finding out the best way to run away from the last class to reach the Tennis Court early without the Professor coming to know of it, there were experts. They took some small remuneration like getting some reports done by us, but we never grudged them. We knew that in a year’s time, we shall have some *‘murgas’* doing these for us!