**DOWN MEMORY LANE –** *hostel life*

- A K Ojha (1965 – Mining)

It was an old military warehouse used during the Second World War. The structure was built keeping in mind the strength required to frustrate pilferers and not for any aesthetic beauty. It was therefore no surprise that Tank-shop Hostel, - that was the current name, stood out like an eyesore over an otherwise pleasing landscape. It no longer contained any merchandise that would attract any thief. In fact, the robbers and thieves had marked the neighbourhood area as ‘out of bound’. The community could not forget the beating one thief had received when he, totally ignorant of the natural urge of first year students to do heroics in front of neighbourhood girls, entered a house nearby and, by cruelty of luck, crashed against some soiled utensils during the process of his exploration of the house in the dark. The frightened householder raised an alarm and almost immediately a score of Tank-shop inmates descended on the screen, fished out the miscreant who stood hidden behind a bush and gave him a thorough bashing in typical Shammi Kapoor style. Some examination was at the door and many students were awake to respond to the alarm. This was, of course, before our time.

Tank-shop hostel was a huge structure with asbestos sheet roof, as big as all our workshop sheds combined. About one hundred students were housed in large cubicles created with six- feet high walls, - three in a room. There was no difficulty in visiting your class friends’ room and raid his locker when there is nobody in the room provided you were athletic and comfortable walking over a single-brick wall. Many of the residents had mastered this art. My room mates were Baladev Bhattacharya, and Sunil Sarkar, We three studied together in Belur Vidya Mandira. Sunil, incidentally, was a master of diplomacy. Baladev and I would have opposite views on most of the things (Shammi Kapoor films were one of the few exceptions). Sunil, a couple of years older than us, would take the mediator’s chair, walk on tight rope and bring the two opposing views closer. We gave him the sobriquet of ‘U Thant’ after the then Secretary General of UNO. Both, Sunil and Baladev left this planet.

The hostel was, for all practical purposes, a large hall and there was nothing like privacy. Some serious students were upset that they could not study as they wished. Someone or other of the 100 heads will have the urge for singing or abusing someone else practically all the time. There was no point complaining; the offender would raise his voice further at the scent of any resentment and whatever concentration one could manage would evaporate. There was unwritten protocol that singing and abusing activities would remain suspended from about a week before the examinations till the tests were over. On a typical day, the inmates would return to the rooms after completing various outdoor activities like games & sports, careless strolling around the campus or unadulterated pursuit of gazing at the girls and then, a sort of competition for hurling the choicest filthy invectives would begin. This would normally start between two friends in the adjoining rooms calling each other CGPP and such other things, and gradually joined by about a dozen or more voices from different corners. Recognising the individual voices in that chorus was a game for passive listeners. If you analysed the contents, you would be amazed at the richness of imagination of the participants, - often using a few sentences in describing in details the nature of activity the abuser proposes to indulge in. It was unanimously agreed that Punjabi was very rich in expletives and all of us quickly learnt a few abuses in that language.

We had hostel mates varying in specifications of 43 kg weight with 86 Decibel voice(S K Agarwal, who served NMDC for life and retired as its Chairman, now a sought-after Consultant by various players trying to establish new steel plants) and 86 kg weight with 43 Dbl. voice (Mohan Khaitan, who worked with Coal India and passed away long back). Arun Agashe, Harish Paul, J S Gill (capsule Gill, - of Mahavir Colliery fame), Deepak Budhiraja (Brigadier – retired), RSP Singh (Brig. – retired), Janak Raj Sharma Katuri Lal Sharma, Ram Lakhan Singh, Vedananda Malik and the rest of the regulars would fall somewhere in between. They were the star players. Unfortunately, all those friends have gone to heaven over last many years. Prabir Roy (the first AISM to join the newly opened IIM, Kolkata and became a Professor of Operations Research in USA), Pradip Mehta (Brig. – retired), A Bhattashali (Mr. ISM & Mr. Dhanbad all four years of his stay, now settled in Canada), T S Kapoor (settled in Mumbai after retirement from ONGC and some others were occasional participants.

Life in Tank-shop hostel was quite enjoyable. The food was tolerable without being good. We had regional messes operating at the Old hostel complex, but Tank-shop residents mostly ate in their own mess. The thing I remember most about the mess is the clamour for earning the attention of the Principal mess servant, Surindar on the day meat was on the menu. Four meat pieces of about 10 mm size would be served to everyone with one piece of 20-30 mm potato. One could request for extra gravy but nothing more. However, we suspected that a few smart boarders who were in good books of Surindar used to get pieces of meat or potato submerged in gravy!

We were the last inmates of Tank-shop. New hostels were coming up. First year students of our next batch were put up in Barracks No. 12. We, second year seniors were allotted rooms in Upper and Lower Barracks. We were the same room mates in 2nd year also. We became members of the Bengalee Mess. I remember an interesting incident relating to the mess and Sunil Sarkar. Half of the Bengalee mess boarders used to be broke by about tenth day after receipt of scholarship money or fathers’ money orders and would practice acute cost control measures for the rest of the month. Essentials like cigarettes, coca cola at the school canteen or occasional movie could not be sacrificed. So default in payment of mess bills was the measure adopted by many. Poor Sunil, ignorant of these internal equations was all enthusiasm as he took up his position as mess manager in our second year. The month passed off smoothly but the real drama unfolded thereafter. As usual, many boarders failed to clear the dues in time and creditors started pressing for money. Not satisfied with the response of the mess servants, they took to directly approaching the Mess Manager. We were coming out of the mess after breakfast one Sunday morning. Suddenly a lanky figure surfaced in front of us blocking our way. He was the coal-supply man and had been paid Rs. 30/ short. He demanded Sunil to pay him immediately. Sunil, all smiles hitherto was stunned. A lateral thinker, he regained his composure in a few seconds and admonished the creditor. “Don’t you know that this is a Sunday and my day off- day? Call on me on a working day.” The poor man was perplexed. He saluted and moved away.

But some others were not as obliging that we found out a few days later. Our classes used to start at 08 00 AM. We would normally leave the hostel after 07 30, run to the Mess for a quick grab of breakfast and reach the class through backdoor just as the teacher was taking the roll call. We saw Sunil getting ready earlier one day and leaving the hostel well before 07 00 mumbling something like early rising being good for health. We were still lying on the bed when there was a loud knock at the door. There was a husky man with thick handlebar mustache looking for ‘Sarkar Saab’. He was the milkman. This routine continued for a few days. On the 4th or 5th day, Sunil suddenly returned almost immediately after starting for the Mess and dived inside the quilt announcing that he was feeling feverish. The handlebar mustache knocked about two minutes later. On my reporting that Sarkar had suddenly fallen ill and could not leave the bed, he laid his towel on the verandah and sat down declaring that he would sit there till Sarkar Saab recovered and paid his dues!

We moved to the Old Hostel in our third year. We had double seated accommodations. Baladev continued as my room mate. The principal advantage of Old Hostel lodging was that it allowed us 10 minutes extra time for sleeping. The Common Room was bigger, TT tables better. This was quite a change from the rickety tables we had in the Barracks.

We were the first occupants of the New Hostel which was ready just before we moved to the final year. This was a modern building with much shine and polish and we liked it. I remember a rather funny incident during our New Hostel residence. A N Kheto, who left us after an excellent innings with CMPDI, came into money one Sunday. It was like this. He had loaned Rs. 10/ to a class mate in his First year. He considered the money as lost when the friend failed to repay even after several reminders. Now, in the Fourth year, the debtor appeared out of the blue and returned the money to Kheto mumbling some apologies. Kheto-da offered that if somebody could eat sweets worth Rs. 10/ in one sitting, he would fund the project. In case of failure to finish the lot, the competitor was to pay for the sweets.

Now, sweets had been principal of my many weaknesses (even now). Ten rupees could buy a lot of sweets those days. Feasting on such sumptuous scale was a temptation difficult to resist. I took up the challenge. A few of us trooped to Shankar’s sweets shop in Hirapur in the afternoon. We ordered 40 pieces of *Chitta Ranjan sandesh* available in ten rupees. (This variety of sweets came to Calcutta market much later). I started the process of eating surrounded by 5 -6 friends sitting around me sipping plain water with resentful looks. Well, the journey was delightful at first, tolerable for a while thereafter and outright torturous after mid point. If I could afford to spend Rs. 10/, I would have stopped in midcourse. Compelled to continue the process, I put my sharp mischievous brain to work. I suggested after mid-point that it was very uncivil of me to devour the delicious *sandesh* all alone and offered some pieces to the audience. Before Kheto-da could protest, everyone picked up one / two pieces. This event was simple. But the corollary was to come years later. I was at the School preparing for my 1st Class Managers’ examinations in a student’s room, allowing him to sleep on the floor as was the custom those days. A new fellow knocked and enquired if I was Ojha Saab. Irritated at being disturbed, I assured him that such was the case. The boy was all smiles and requested me to join the *aloo paratha* competition in the New Mess next day. I was surprised. *Aloo paratha* was a delicacy I patronized but never thought that I had the ability to participate in a competition. I enquired and found out that the last year’s champion devoured 19 pieces and the bar is likely to be raised every year. My best score had been four. I confided this to him and declined to join. He gave a disbelieving smile and pressed me again. It was then that I asked him as to why he had chosen me to request. “Why, Sir, you ate 200 *sandesh* in one sitting at Hirapur only the other day”? I realized how a mole is made a mountain over the years through hearsay and gossip!