

St. John's College, Jaffna - 175th anniversary

by

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St. John's College, Jaffna, one of the leading and certainly one of the oldest educational institutions in the country celebrates her 175th anniversary this year. From small beginnings she has become the most sought after boys' school in the north and enjoys a very high reputation in the academic sphere as well as in sports and other co-curricular activities.

Three missionaries of the Church Missionary Society arrived in Ceylon, in the year 1818, soon after the British took over the island. One of them, Rev. Joseph Knight went over to Jaffna to establish a mission there, one went to Baddegama and the third to Kotte. Rev. Knight settled in Nallur, which was the seat of the ancient kings of Jaffna and started his evangelistic work. It was in 1823, he decided to start the Nallur English Seminary, to train native agents for evangelistic work.

This Seminary was later to become St. John's College. There were 7 boys to start with, increasing to 13 in 1824, 30 in 1825 and picking up in later years. All boys were boarded, clothed and educated free, with the main purpose of making them Christians and training them for evangelistic work. One of the earliest students Mr. Hensman, who joined the school in 1828, was ordained minister in 1863 and served as Head Master for a period.

There was another, Mr. Handy, who also took holy orders and was Actg. Principal from 1889 to 1892. Robert Williams and T. H. Crosette were two others who started life as students and rose to hold administrative positions in the school during the missionary era.

In 1841, the need was felt to start a girls' school and the Nallur Seminary was shifted to Chundikuli so that the bungalow at Nallur could be used as a girls' school. This is the present site occupied by St. John's College for the past 157 years. It appears that the girls school did not materialise at that time but had to wait till 1896, for the wife of another Principal of St. John's, Mrs. Carter to start classes for a few Hindu girls' in the Principal's Bungalow, which has now grown into Chundikuli Girls' College.

From the church at Nallur built by the Dutch used by the school, the school moved close to the church of St. John the Baptist built by the Portuguese. This church which was in a dilapidated condition was demolished and rebuilt in 1859 by the government. An interesting feature of this church was its roof, which was covered with slate brought from Portugal, thereby the common reference to St. John's as the 'slate school'. The slate was replaced by tiles in the thirties except for the vestry which also was replaced in the fifties, when slate became unavailable.

Six Forms

In the early days, the school had six forms, the lowest being the 6th going up to the 1st from which candidates were presented to the Matriculation of the Madras University.

In 1889, the school became affiliated to the Calcutta University and was given the status of a College and presented candidates to the FA (First in Arts) of the University. In 1862, the school declined the grant from the government as the missionaries felt that it was not compatible with their principles. It was run from fees charged from the students for the first time, as well as subsidy from the CMS. Government grant was resumed after ten years. As a result of a cholera outbreak in 1866 in which Head Master Robert Williams also died, the school remained closed for almost an year.

With successive missionary Principals the school made steady progress and completed the centenary in style in 1923 under the principalship of Rev. Henry Peto. It was during Peto's time, the school started excelling in sports being schools cricket and soccer champions on the north for several years in succession. The numbers on roll remained around 450.

Schooling started at the age of five when students spent the first four years in a 'vernacular school' and came into the English school at the age of 8 or 9. After five years students were presented to the Cambridge Junior Examination and after another two years, to either the Cambridge Senior or London Matriculation. After the London Matriculation, most found jobs in the government which was easily available and the select few who chose to, went on to university College for which entrance was there for the asking.

Rev. Peto was Principal from 1920 to 1940. He died at the age of 50 in a drowning accident at Thondamanaru. To succeed him, the first national Principal was appointed in the person of Rev. J. T. Arulanantham who was then vice Principal.

It was during this period that the school started to expand both in extent and in numbers. Free education had been introduced and there was pressure for admission and from around 450, numbers rose to well over one thousand by the time Rev. Arulanantham retired in 1957. The 125th Anniversary was celebrated in 1948.

Advanced Level

University entrance examination was started in the forties due to pressure for admission and St. John's started post Matriculation classes and later university entrance classes followed by Advanced Level, for which better laboratory facilities were needed. It was also in 1940 when girls were admitted to the post matriculation classes as girls' schools in Jaffna were not equipped to handle science. This was discontinued only in the late fifties when the girls' schools caught up.

1936 was also a memorable year in the life of the college when Chundikuli Girls' College shifted to their new premises across the road. What started as a past time for a Principal's wife to educate a few girls in Jaffna in 1896, had grown into a full blown girl's college occupying about a third of the St. John's campus. Both schools benefited by the move.

The Arulanantham era was a period of expansion. Several neighbouring houses were acquired to house teachers. More important was the acquisition of the cinema which had come up right opposite the school and church, against all protests. The cinema went bankrupt and the college promptly acquired it and made it into a hostel and master's quarters.

Take over

Then came the big blow of the schools take over in 1962 and serious consideration was given to handing over the school to the government as the feeling was that it could not be run as a non fee levying school without government grant. But the wisdom and foresight of a few prevailed and St. John's remained private non-fee levying school taking tremendous risks going into the unknown future entirely on faith.

One may consider the following years as the most traumatic in the recent history of the school. Money was hard to come by. Buildings acquired during the good days had to be sold to pay salaries. Majestic mahogany trees that were the hallmark of the school had to be sacrificed for the same purpose. It was a heroic struggle and we pay a special tribute to those who helped maintain the school, especially to Mr. J. C. Handy, Manager, Mr. A. W. Rajasekeram, Principal and many others, who were instrumental in raising the funds.

The prestige that the school now enjoys has more than vindicated their dream, their faith and their untiring efforts to run the school against all odds. When in 1982 the government relented and decided to pay the salaries of staff, there was a sense of relief. Even then, this grant covers only about 50% of the cost of running the school. For the other 50% the school still depends on the goodwill of parents, old boys and some foreign Christian organisations.

The Ter Jubilee (150) years were celebrated in 1975 and to commemorate that event, the old boys collected funds and put up the Peto Memorial Hall, probably the largest in Jaffna.

1987 was another bad year when many of the buildings were damaged by the Indian army offensive of that year. Minor damages were repaired by the Indian army. A major part of the laboratory which was badly damaged was demolished and its place a magnificent structure, a new science complex has been built with six laboratories and twelve classrooms with a small pavilion incorporated.

The Swiss Government, the Norwegian Church and the World Council of Churches gave generously towards this project. This is the Arulanantham Memorial Science Block which will be declared open as part of the 175th Anniversary celebrations in May 1998.

Then came 1995 and the Sri Lankan army offensive and the school was extensively damaged, The damaged buildings have been repaired and the school is thankful to the President's Fund and the British Government for their generous grant for rebuilding. To commemorate the 175th anniversary, the school plans to build an Administrative block, thanks to a generous grant from the Norwegian Government.

25 Principals

During the 175 years history, the school had had 25 Principals to all of whom the school owes a deep debt of gratitude, to have brought this school from small beginnings to this pre-eminent position. During the last century, the turn over was high for reasons of travel and illness. But starting from the turn of this

century, St. John's has had Rev. Jacob Thompson for 20 years, Rev. Henry Peto for another 20 from 1920 to 1940 and Rev. Arulanantham for another 17 from 1940 to 1957. During those 57 years there had been just three Principals and they more than anyone else held to shape the school and leave an indelible mark of their tenure.

The aims of starting the school in the early part of the last century, as stated earlier, was to make evangelists to preach the Gospel. Over the years, conversion to Christianity has been given up as an objective and even the compulsory teaching of the Bible had to be given up in the late thirties.

However St. John's and other CMS schools still continue to inculcate among students, Christian values of equality, fair play, charity, discipline and such like which are appreciated by Christians and non Christians alike who seek admission to these schools not only for their academic excellence but for the overall training that they receive.

Trauma

In spite of all the trauma of recent years St. John's has become the most sought after school in the north from the sixties up to this date. Academically, her results have always been excellent and hardly an year passes when the school is not among the first ten in the country in the A/L results. In sport too, she has always been at the top in the North.

Over the years Johnians have held the highest positions in the country in all walks of life. St. John's may take pride in the fact that she has produced the bulk of the Anglican Tamil clergy, right from the start up to the present. St. John's can justly be proud of her products. Statesmen of the calibre like Mr. Maithripala Sena-nayake and Mr. S. J. V. Chelvanayagam, Chief Justice Nagalingam, and a host of others in all walks of life have brought credit to the school.

Those of us who had the privilege of having studied there owe a deep debt of gratitude to the school which made something of us. She has certainly left an indelible mark in our lives. Johnians are now spread all over the world and there are Old Boy's Associations in UK, Canada and Australia. Where they are their love and loyalty to the school is always evident.

With such loyalty and support, the future of the school is assured. I would like to wish the Principal, Mr. Thanapalan, the staff, students and parents, the very best for the future. We now move into the next century and the next millennium in faith. By the year 2023 we would be celebrating the second century. Most of us would be gone by then and to those who would be around for that event, we wish you all the very best to take the school to even greater heights.

May God Bless St. John's.