

St. John's College - A citadel of education

St. John's College Jaffna, one of the oldest schools in Sri Lanka, is currently celebrating the 175th anniversary of its founding. Its reputation for excellence has remained undiminished despite repeated and extensive destruction in recent years. In fact, its response has been to go beyond reconstruction to the ambitious planned programme of development that is now under way. Here **V.R. Amarasingham**, a retired Vice Principal of St. John's looks back
(Extracted from The Sunday Times of 3rd May 1998)

There are four important phases in the lifespan of any individual - child, youth, adult and old age. As a teacher at St. John's, Jaffna for nearly 28 years it was my rare privilege and fortune to be associated with child, youth and adult. The students formed the first two segments and the adults were the co-workers from both tutorial and non-tutorial staff.

The moment a teacher focuses his attention on monetary gains he loses the excitement that is so richly potent with youthful ingenuity and creativity. I once asked Rev. A.J.C. Selvaratnam who was the Warden of S. Thomas' College Mt. Lavinia, and later Vicar of St. John's Church, Jaffna, "Sir, do you like to teach or to preach?" "Do you prefer to be Warden of a school or Vicar of a Church?" He said, "A school is like a flowing river always bringing in new students, where one can learn as you teach. A Church is like a lake with stagnant water and one very often sees off faces and old people" and humorously added, "where there is death there is hope".

I shall confine this article mainly to my period as a teacher from 1953-1980. This period illustrates the community life in our school. It was long enough for a teacher to become part, of the very ethos of the school community. For 175 years St. John's with its rich traditions and noble ideas has continued to stand tall in educational culture. I never taught in any school earlier, and all my teaching career in Sri Lanka was at St. John's. Having heard of great teachers who were there and others who continue to be there, I went in with much fear. With Oliver Goldsmith in his poem, The Village School Master, I gazed and gazed (at the senior teachers) and the more I gazed the more the wonder grew that these small heads could carry all they knew.

The Rev. J.T. Arulanathan, the then Principal offered me Science in the middle and upper school and Botany in A/L classes. He also wanted me to be a boarding master. It did not take me long to realize that the senior teachers were down to earth men. They gave the juniors so much encouragement that work as a teacher became pleasant and interesting. Mr. E.M. Ponnudurai, in particular, who did A/L teaching and was senior boarding house master, encouraged me in both class and boarding work. He was a very strict disciplinarian and, loved St. John's. For many old boys EMP was St. John's and St. John's was EMP. St. John's, by any standard, is one of the leading schools in the island. For decades many Sinhalese students sought admission because of the school's reputation for discipline. It is perhaps the best intangible quality that any institution can have. Freedom with responsibility and transparent honesty are hallmarks of self discipline. Education is that which is left behind after the facts are forgotten. In 1962 six Cabinet Ministers visited Jaffna. They were felicitated at a dinner hosted by the OBA. Maitripala Senanayake, an old boy of the school, addressed the school assembly. He recalled happy memories as a student here. He recalled with gratitude what St. John's had done to him, Mr. A.W. Rajasekera, the Principal at that time, was equal to the task. He reminded the Minister that such was the generous treatment that St. John's gave to minority communities. He went on to say that St. John's expects her old boys to give the same treatment to minority communities. Mr. Senanayake is now one of the Vice Patrons of South Sri Lanka SJCOBA. Mr. K.B. Basnayake, a retired Senior Supdt. of Prisons, has many friends from his school days at St. John's. He was a hosteler and was well looked after during the 1958 riots. He is a very loyal old boy and it is fitting that he is one of the Vice Presidents of the South Sri Lanka OBA.

In the daily life of the school, the school assembly sets the tone for the whole day. Many senior teachers were fully equipped for inculcating educational and moral standards. Mr. Subramaniam (Kadavul), gifted in Tamil and in English spiced with Latin considered the assembly hall as the stage to groom future leaders.

St. John's has reached Himalayan heights in games, matching any school in the island, especially in cricket and athletics. A peak period was in the early sixties.

In 1963 St. John's athletic team just missed the trophy for the Tarbat Challenge Cup in the All Ceylon Public Schools Athletics Championship. In this meet right from the first event till the final relays, we were leading Royal College who eventually became champions.

We had regular annual cricket fixtures with St. Sylvester's, Kandy and Nalanda, and occasionally with other outstation schools. In 1965, Royal College, Colombo had to eat humble pie when they played against us in Jaffna. Not even the fiery pace bowling of Thalayasingam could contain the onslaught of our batsmen Kanagadurai, Deivendra and others. A shadow of one day cricket was in the offing in this match when we had to make a little over 100 runs in less than half that number of minutes. The Combined

Jaffna Schools cricket team had six St. John's players at that time. This team defeated the Colombo Combined schools team on St. Peter's College grounds.

Hostel life perhaps brings the best nostalgic memories of a student. Having had 17 years experience as a hostel master in various dormitories, ending up as senior hostel master, it gave me sufficient experience of 'boys are boys' pranks from young to old. It is the discipline in the boarding that sets the tone for the whole school.

In 1960 schools were taken over by the government and St. John's had to take a crucial decision. We opted to be a non-fee levying school. The educational well-being of St. John's was not sacrificed at the altar of financial benefits. This great institution launched out into the unknown future. With great faith, Mr. J.C. Handy, the manager of the school with a band of dedicated old boys, parents and teachers saw great visions of the distant scene. The school strained every sinew to find the money. Even the rich mahoganies and compound buildings were sold. When the mind opens its portals, paradise is unfolded. Gradually the nets were cast on the right side and the money to run the school did not pose a serious problem. St. John's today after 38 years continues to stand as a citadel of educational calibre, thanks to Principals, teachers, old boys and parents all over the globe who rally round to keep the school at its best in every turn of changing scenes.