

Random Recollections

By

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Preman Rajadurai's article "Ninaivil Nirainthavai" in the December issue of our newsletter persuaded me to go down memory lane and write some of my own experiences at St John's College, Jaffna (SJC). When one sits down to reflect on past incidents, especially at school, memories flow thick and fast that one is at wit's end which to include and what to ignore. To make it manageable, I have decided that only those which are of human interest and reveal the character of the school during my days there should be included. I have written about odd incidents, some funny, others comic, some verging on the bizarre and some which bring out the essence of character of the school life at that time. To avoid embarrassment to any of the characters involved, I shall refer to them by symbols such as X, Y, Z etc. I have given myself "poetic licence" to embellish some of the stories around the edges, but the main facts are true. I joined SJC in 1948 after two tortuous years at Chundikuli Girls' College (CGC). During those days SJC did not have classes below Std 4 and boys were allowed to study at CGC before going to SJC. Some of us who were at CGC, in later years agreed that it would have done our souls a lot of good had we had our last two years at CGC instead of the initial ones! My uncle Mr J.H.Ariaratnam who had been a prefect at SJC and who had just left the school to enter the university, admitted my younger brother Jega and me to SJC one bright morning in January 1948. He introduced us to the Principal, Rev J T.Arulanantham, who was known to our family. He remarked that one of us resembled the father and the other the mother. He of course just said that to put us at ease. Jega and I have still not resolved which one resembled the father and which one the mother. Not that it matters now, but at that time it was hotly contested as like all small boys, neither of us wanted to resemble a female!

If I thought that life at SJC would be a welcome change from the feminine atmosphere at CGC, I was in for a rude shock. I was admitted to Std 5B which was one of the classrooms attached to Figg Hall at the four corners. From my seat, I could see the other three classes and I was horrified to witness the frequent use of the cane. Teachers at CGC did not have recourse to the cane and this latest phenomenon was a revelation. However, I got used to the atmosphere and did quite well at my studies. But I still remember with dread one of the masters, a squint eyed terror of a Tamil teacher whom we shall refer to as Mr X. He did not believe in the efficacy of the cane but relied on the quickness of his hands with which he delivered ambidextrous thundering slaps on the cheeks of the hapless students. I do not want to poke fun at a deformity, but honestly, when Mr X looked ahead from his table at the centre of the classroom, no one was certain where he was looking as his eyes focussed on two opposite corners of the room! I remember a comic incident where he asked one boy whom he thought had caused some disturbance to come towards him. Lo and behold, two boys from opposite corners walked towards him. Mr X did not wait to find out the cause. Four thunderclaps sounded as with the speed of which Mohammad Ali would have been proud, Mr X gave both boys his two handed treatment! Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and sigh; they returned to their seats sadder and none the wiser. How the real culprit kept his cool and burst out laughing during the 10 minutes interval is still green in my memory. Two other memories of that year are the 125th anniversary celebrations of the college and the football match with St Patricks which ended in a fight. St Patricks won by 3 goals to 1. Then they added insult to injury (or the other way about) when their supporters beat up our players and supporters, including some masters. St Patricks which up to that time had had a good record in sports and education, lost its reputation. It was 10 years before St Johns resumed sporting contacts with them. By then they were a shadow of their former self. The most lasting impression acquired in that first year at SJC and which influenced a host of Johnnians was the discipline maintained. Boys in Std 4 & 5 classes (known as the lower school) had their assembly in the Figg Hall. On occasions when a visiting dignitary came, we were asked to go to the main Robert Williams Hall. I remember our class teacher drilling into us to behave at the main hall. Some of the boys who had been there before told us about the prefects and monitors who maintain discipline in the hall and to look for the sign when the senior prefect will come and scrape his boots at the entrance to Robert Williams Hall! Sure enough the din in the hall made by all the talking students, stopped all

of a sudden. The senior prefect came and scraped his boots at the entrance and the prefects and monitors came down the centre aisle and the sides of the hall and a hush descended. The Principal and the teachers were assembled on the stage and after the meeting, everyone went out marching in order. I think the senior prefect in those early days was Thiru Kadirgamar. This was my first introduction to the discipline for which our college is well known in addition to the academic excellence it provides. Years later, when I was in the AL classes, I asked two boys who had joined SJC from a Colombo school, what they found different at SJC from their original school. After some thought they said they found the coaching for the AL examination was unparalleled and the Zoology master was the best teacher they had ever come across. But the most surprising thing for them was the discipline maintained by the prefects and monitors. They could not understand it. Where they came from the prefects were known as cops and they were quite often at the butt end of practical jokes. Unwittingly, but unerringly these two boys (neither of them Tamil and both now doctors practising in Australia) had hit upon the two very points for which SJC is well known - education and discipline. I suppose tradition has something to do with this and nearly 100 years (the prefect system was started by Rev Thompson in 1909) of the prefect system and the guidance and support given to it by the Principal and staff had made it into an effective aid in maintaining discipline without recourse to strong arm tactics.

1949 in Form IA class. RT was repeating it for the third year as a student and whatever he said was accepted as gospel truth by the others. He asked us to look out for a master Mr Y who he said had the habit of breaking wind (I am loath here to use the usual four letter word also beginning with f lest I upset the prudes, if any, among my readers) during the first period after lunch after a heavy meal. According to RT he (Mr Y) will ask the class to clap with the ostensible reason of keeping the boys alert after lunch, but really to hide any noises emanating from him. Sure enough Mr Y was to teach us Geography and he had a couple of periods a week, just after the lunch period. However, much as we waited, no gastronomical sounds or requests for applause seemed to be forthcoming! We waited in vain for a year and a day until Mr Y retired at the end of the year. He seems to have taught geography in an acceptable manner, for I can still remember that North America is in the northern hemisphere and South America in the southern hemisphere! It was long after that we realised RT was leading us on in one of his tall and apocryphal tales. RT is today the owner of a string of rental and commercial properties in UK and doing very well. No wonder, as he had had a great start in his formative years at SJC!

1950 and we were starting algebra and geometry for the first time. I remember the shiny new box of instruments for geometrical constructions. It was a "Dreadnought" set with the picture of the famous battleship painted against the background of blue sea and sky. Usually my text books were old dog eared volumes which had been passed on to me through three elder sister over five years and where they had written their names in several pages in what seemed indelible ink - I spent a lot of time in rubbing them out and writing my own name, the consoling thought being that when it passed on to my younger brother Jega, it will be still more dog eared and he would have to erase some more names! But the instrument box was new and my prized possession. I am dwelling on it a bit as it has some connection with my next story. Those days, even though the time tables were set at the beginning of a term, the masters who were to teach a particular subject was not decided for a week or two and teachers were assigned temporarily until permanent arrangements were made. Mr Z came to teach us geometrical constructions on that first day. I had the box of instruments placed on my desk. He asked me what subject was given on the timetable. I said geometrical constructions. He thought for a minute or two and then said in a sleepy nasal drawl for which he was well known, and I report in *verbatim*, "Boys, pull your things out and do number one". For boys who are always on the alert for anything with a double-edged meaning, this was a howler of the first magnitude! Bursts of suppressed laughter began to erupt all over the class like damp squibs, and some of it not so damp!! Mr Y realised what he said and corrected himself ---All right, all right" he said. "What I meant was take your books and boxes of instruments and do lesson number one"!

The next anecdote is about my brother Chelvan. He started schooling in 1953. If we say

that Chelvan liked school, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. He hated it, but even at that early age he was not one who let the grass grow under his feet when opportunity beckoned. Such an opportunity arose one morning shortly after he started schooling. While the Headmaster of the lower school and the students were at prayers with eyes closed, Chelvan did the vanishing trick! He cut across the Chundikuli parsonage adjoining the lower school, got on to Kandy Road where our house was situated and ran home. Chelvan's scoot was the topic of discussion at our house that night. As Jega and I were in the senior forms, it was decided we should keep an eye on him. So the next morning I went towards the lower school. Some of you will remember that the lower school had half walls and the rest of it up to the roof consisted of welded mesh. A small boy seated at his desk cannot be seen from outside. When I approached the building a strange sight met my eyes. I saw a man in a very peculiar position with one hand held out in front of him and the other held down rigidly at an odd angle while all the time one eye was closed and the other was roving all around. At first I thought some person was performing penance or "nethikadan" to fulfil a vow. Then when I went closer everything became clear. I perceived that it was Mr M, the Headmaster, conducting prayers at the lower school assembly, holding Chelvan with his left hand to prevent him from escaping while his right hand was held in front in the normal attitude of prayer. His right eye was closed, also in an attitude of prayer while the other eye was keeping watch over the rest of his flock! Poor Mr M. He died not long afterwards of a heart attack. How much of it was due to Chelvan and his cohorts is anybody's guess. Chelvan is today keeping a roving eye on tax dodgers here. If any of you are thinking of confronting him with this story, it will be prudent to double check your tax returns over the last seven years before you do so.

In those days punishment by caning was an accepted fact in all boys schools. St John's was no exception and it was one way of maintaining discipline. But the spectacle of public caning was something different altogether. During my stay of almost 10 years there, I witnessed two instances of it. It was meant for a serious offence and meted out before the whole school and was an alternative for dismissal from school. The Principal would send a notice around all the classes informing of a special assembly. All of us then knew that something serious was about to take place. Once all the students were gathered in Williams Hall and the staff on the stage, the Principal would read the riot act in a grave tone, explaining the reason for the punishment. There ensued a deafening silence and you could hear the proverbial pin dropping. Then the Principal would summon the culprits one by one and administer six cuts on the butts while the boy stood bent down from his hips. On the second of the two occasions, the Principal got one of the masters to administer the caning. He wielded the cane so effectively that the cane broke and he was so angry that he threw the half cane in his hand and it flew and stuck the Principal! Normally this would have evoked some twitters from the students, but on this occasion no sound emanated. After the public caning all of us would go back, but the mood remained sombre for the rest of the day and conversation would be in hushed tones. One of the boys who was publicly caned on this second occasion was made a monitor a couple of years later. This showed everything had been forgiven and forgotten and the lesson that a fallen individual can rise again was indelibly etched in our memories. This was an example of the culture at SJC, disciplined and all round education. I seem to be coming back to this theme of discipline and education like a *leit motif* in a musical composition. Even though I have mentioned about caning, I should emphasise that its frequency was not that prevalent. In these enlightened days (or is it?), corporal punishment is anathema, but 50 years ago it was as I said, an accepted fact. It has now been banned. I think SJC gave it up in the sixties.

In 1954 I entered the Lower VI Science class. This is the start of the A.L classes when boys who had hitherto worn shorts to class changed into long trousers. This was where girls joined SJC for the A.L. They provided a lot of colour in their sarees (though grey matter was conspicuously lacking among them!). I remember that Mr A was our class teacher. He was a popular jovial man who always seemed to be using the Sherlock Holmesian advice of "always look for the obvious answer first". He used to address the girls as "sarees" and the boys as "trousers". The L VI Sc that year had a number of girls (they must have known that some good looking blokes were in that class). It had become a custom for the girls to occupy the front rows and the boys the rear ones. The

classroom was the Physics lecture theatre where the floor was at different levels (like a cinema), with the front seats at a lower level and the rear ones gradually getting higher. One day all of us boys planned and went and quickly occupied all the front seats. The girls were forced to occupy the rear ones. Mr A as usual came to mark the register just before the first period. He noticed something different, looked up and down and asked, "Why have the sarees gone up and the trousers come down?" Even as he said it, he knew he had committed a colossal *faux pas*. Amidst the giggles from the girls and the guffaws from the guys, the irrepressible Senthil completed his discomfiture by advising, "Look for the obvious answer, Sir". This Senthil is the same person who as Dr S.S.Vasan was Mayor at Casino and who died tragically when he crashed while piloting his plane over the hills on the boundary between NSW and Queensland a couple of years ago. Some of you would have met him and his wife when they attended the Red and Black Ball in 1994. To come back to the story, Mr A was a sporting guy and he took it up in good spirit, but advised henceforth let the sarees be always down and the trousers always up!

My reminiscences also bring to mind some odd incidents on and off the cricket field. Jega and I got into the 2nd XI in 1953. We were to play the mini big match against Jaffna Central. My uncle Mr J.S. Ariaratnam was teaching at Central at that time. He had supplied us with the Indian monthly sports magazine Sport & Pastime and generally encouraged us in cricket. He was very pleased we had made the team and was anxious for us to do well. I was to open the batting and Jega to come two down. My uncle came to the match which was played on the Central grounds about an hour after start of play. He wheeled his bicycle towards the SJC tent, saw me and called me. We were about 40 runs for 6 wickets at that stage. He asked how much I scored. "One run" I said. "How much did Jega score" "Zero" was my reply. He did not utter a word but hopped on to his bicycle and vanished from the place, like an outlaw jumping on his horse and vanishing at the sight of Sheriff Hopalong Cassidy in the old Wild West! His speed would have won him the Tour-de-France race, such was his hurry to get away! No matter that we both did much better in the 2nd innings and SJC won the match; he did not appear again. More than 30 years later, I was visiting him at his home when the SLAF started one of its aerial bombing raids. We had to shelter in an underground bunker built in his compound. I reminded him of this incident and we all had a hearty laugh. We were exchanging old yarns, quite unconcerned of any danger. The bombing seemed far away. Another personal memory concerns my father. He was very proud when both of us were playing for the first XI. He was an Old Centralite, a fact which Jega and I (both dyed-in-the-wool Johnnians) tried to keep hidden as if it was a skeleton in the family cupboard! My father, however, was elected as a Vice President of the Jaffna Central OBA and used to be invited into their tent for the big matches. He used to go into their tent and cheer vigorously for SJC, much to the annoyance and ire of the Centralites! Had it occurred in recent times, he would have been booted out or hooted out. O tempora! O mores! For some minor matches, the SJC team used to take an old ex-cricket captain of theirs to umpire. While the match was in progress, he used to get involved in it and frequently shouted to our fielders to throw the ball to the bowler's or wicketkeeper's end to run out the batsmen! While the opposing batsmen were nonplussed, we were thoroughly embarrassed by such "impartial" urnpirin!! He was a real character and used to regale us with hilarious stories, some of which would have made even Baron Munchausen turn green with envy.

Some of you may remember the science exhibitions SJC used to have every year in the mid-fifties to collect funds for their building fund. These used to take place over three days. Most of the schools used to visit the exhibition during the day time, while visitors frequented it in the evenings as there were games of skill, short eats etc to be enjoyed. As is the custom in Jaffna, the toilets for the men and women were in different locations, with notices displayed as "LADIES TOILET" or "GENTS TOILET". One day there was a bit of a commotion near the ladies toilet. Ladies were hurrying away looking embarrassed, while some men of the baser sort were lounging around the vicinity with hopeful looks. Some of us senior students were asked to investigate. When we went closer we found some joker had erased the letter I from the word toilet and the notice read "LADIES TO LET"! The damage was quickly repaired and the hope that had sprung up in those bawdy breasts was quickly doused.

My schooldays came to an end at the end of the first term in 1957. I entered the university, but that as Rudyard Kipling would say is a different story. However, I kept in

touch with SJC through the OBA. I was involved closely with OBA activities especially when working in Jaffna. I wrote the "History of St John's College, Jaffna 1923-1983" and was privy to some stories, which may be of interest to readers of this present article. Most of you may have heard about the court case which Mr Panuthevan brought against the college for wrongful dismissal when Mr Pooranampillai was Principal. All of you know that Mr Pooranampillai was a man of sterling character, but not all will know that Mr Panuthevan was also a fine man and a gentleman. He is now a much sought after lecturer in Economics at private institutions preparing students for the CIMA exam. Once while on a trip to Colombo, he told me his side of the story about the case. I was surprised when he said SJC was one of the most liberal institutions he had come across. Coming from a well known leftist (he was a member of the LSSP at one time) and one who had had an argument ending in court about his unlawful dismissal, this was a stunning statement. I do not want to go into details of all he said, but I agree with his sentiments. He said that the education imparted at SJC was very broad encompassing the sciences and humanities, and the outlook on general life and other affairs was very liberal. As an example, the Johnian attitude on the caste system was about 50 years ahead of its time. The culture and the traditions were proved by time and the discipline maintained was not regimental but corrective. Some of the educational innovatives like physics, chemistry, history and geography being compulsory for every student up to the OL class gave them a broad outlook on the world, and the rule that each student must participate in at least one event at the annual sports meet and also must indulge in at least one extra curricular activity provided at school made their education more complete. Think of it and ponder about the time each one of you spent at SJC and you will agree with this assessment. This of course is a reinforcement of my recurrent theme about the quality education and discipline at SJC. The words liberal and discipline may seem paradoxical, but at SJC they have combined to produce excellence in all round education which includes character formation. Mr Panuthevan told me how on the day the case was to be heard, he was waiting at a bus halt for a bus to go to courts when Mr Pooranampillai who was travelling to courts in a taxi, halted it to pick him up and give a lift to courts. What the judge and lawyers thought of the two antagonists arriving in court together and sitting on opposite sides of the Bench would be interesting, but this illustrates the Johnian spirit. By a coincidence, about a week later, Mr Pooranampillai told me his side of the story. He confirmed the incident of the lift in the taxi. He was happy when I told him that Mr Panuthevan held no grudges or ill-will against him or the college. I came off with the idea that both regretted the incident which led to the case and both would have reacted differently had they had a second chance. Mr Pooranampillai was a very successful Principal of two eminent schools in Jaffna, namely Hartley College and SJC. He is well known for his stern discipline, and I will relate two incidents which showed the humane side of him. Once at a cricket match between Hartley and SJC, I was seated next to him. He was cheering both sides and so I asked him which side he supported. He said at the start when he took over the Principalship of SJC, he found it difficult not to support Hartley. But after some years his loyalty was more for SJC! The other incident took place after an annual prize giving function when he was Principal. It had been another successful function and the chief guests and some others were invited to dinner. There was just enough time for some of us invitees which included visitors from Colombo, to nip into Palm Court (situated opposite the college) and have a quick one. Once dinner was over, most of the guests had left, but a few of us were remaining to finalise some arrangements for the OBA celebrations due the next day. We took our chairs to the grounds just outside the dining room and the discussions included the usual jokes and reminiscences such occasions produce. It was a very fine night, just cool enough with a cloudless sky and bright shining stars. All of us had had a good dinner and in jolly mood. We would have readily agreed with Robert Browning that "God 's in His heaven, all 's right with the world". We were discussing a case which was making headlines those days and Mr Anandarajan (V.Principal) remarked that the mistakes of doctors end up 6 feet below ground while the mistakes of lawyers end up 6 feet above ground. Jimmy Rajaratnam who was a leading lawyer and an Old Boy wanted to have a dig at Mr Anandarajan and asked "What happens to the mistakes of teachers"? Pat came Mr Anandarajan's reply, "They become lawyers"! This brought the house down. It was meant as a joke and Jimmy took in good spirits. But I remember Mr Pooranampillai chuckling to himself long after the incident. Mr Anandarajan had a ready wit and a fund of jokes and was always bubbling with humour. I had a close

connection with him when he was Principal and helped the college with engineering assistance. I remember once he came to me and wanted me to design and help in the building of classrooms. I told him that instead of classrooms the money will be well spent in having the front view of SJC near the main gate improved. I told him that the front elevation at CGC was very attractive and that is the first impression visitors have when entering the school. When I used the term front elevation, I was using a very common engineering term to describe the front view of a building. But Mr Anandarajan was not familiar with it and was not sure whether I was having fun with pun on the words. He looked at me in an odd way and said, "I say Tissa, from the time of Adam and Eve, God gave women a more attractive front elevation, but to offset it he gave men a bigger brain. So let CGC develop the talent given to them and we will develop the talent given to us"! It was not meant as a reflection on female intellect, but was said to persuade me to his way of thinking in a humourous way. So it was that the Arulanantham block of classrooms were extended up to the Old Park Road - Main Street junction and the construction of the Rajasegaram block of classrooms at right angles to it as well as the Pooranampillai block of classrooms next to the cemetery resulted after that conversation.

Another story I came across when collecting material for the college history will be of interest to Melburnians as it concerns an Old Boy who had settled down in Victoria. This was related by Rev Sarvananthan who was Vicar in charge of the St John's, Chundikuli parish at that time. He said a visitor from Australia had approached him with a strange request. He wanted to photograph the church altar section with the stained glass window depicting the resurrection, as well as photograph a particular panel in Peto Hall which included a friend's name in it. Now the walls of Peto Hall are adorned with the portraits of past principals of SJC as well as wooden panels with the names of vice principals, jubilarian teachers (those who had taught at SJC for 25 years or more), senior prefects, and captains of various games. It is a veritable "hall of fame". The visitor managed to find the particular panel with his friend's name and photographed it. He explained that he had visited his friend just before his trip to Sri Lanka and had told him of his plans. His friend who was seriously ill asked him for a favour which was to photograph the two items mentioned and give him copies of them. The friend's name was Tom Van den Driesen who as many of you would have already heard was a legendary character at SJC during the time of Rev Peto. His loyalty to his old school was such that during his last days he still thought about it with affection even though he had left it about 50 years ago.

This loyalty and devotion of Old Boys of SJC to the old school is a subject on which I have pondered quite a bit and questioned several of them. Is St John's something special? Quite a number of them have answered in the affirmative. I know that Old Boys and Old Girls of any institution are loyal and devoted to their own alma maters, but I am chauvinistic enough to believe that SJC is special. I remember that during the perilous times in the eighties, our OBA was one of the few volunteer organisations still functioning in Jaffna. In fact the OBA, Jaffna presented the college with a cheque in excess of Rs 300,000 in 1988 at a time when Jaffna had been milked dry by rapacious politics and rampaging rebels. This show of affection is something similar to the respect and devotion that Jews have towards their temple in Jerusalem. What is the reason for this? Is it because bounded by Old Park Road, Main Street and Kandy Road and living within that confined space in the midst of a very densely populated area, we have become a community within a community? I don't know. It is this same sense of devotion which made the Principal and staff carry on with the school work under trees at Kilinochchi during the exodus in 1995-96, writing one of the most glorious chapters in the college history. It is the same loyalty which makes many Old Boys comfortably settled in Australia and other western countries to plan a return to Jaffna and help in some way open to them their old school. The closest show of love by other past pupils towards their old school which can parallel ours, as far as I know, is that of the Old Girls of CGC and this is no coincidence. After all, the story of creation was duplicated when CGC was formed out of a "rib" of SJC more than 100 years ago. Not only do these two schools share the same colours, but they have very similar logos, share the same chapel, form a joint choir and in some countries have joint OBA/OGA associations. CGC is located a stone throw away from SJC which makes the forces of attraction exactly counterbalance the forces of distraction! Our history is inter-twined and our leaders did a wise thing in making both institutions private. It is my conviction that one will not survive without the other. So it is not surprising that the past pupils of these

two sister schools display similar filial affection towards their alma maters. Taken together they are unique. But my question of whether the bond between SJC and its past pupils is something special still remains.

It is a matter of great satisfaction that now the front view of SJC will stand comparison with any other school! The new administration block and library buildings recently opened by His Excellency, the Ambassador for Norway in Sri Lanka, displays the old architectural style which merges with the church edifice and the surrounding buildings. Bala Rajadurai and I are determined to see these as well as the new Arulanantham block with the Anandarajan pavilion encompassed within it, and are planning our pilgrimage to our college to coincide with the OBA centenary due in April 2004. I must not forget to take my heart tablets until that trip is over. Must remind Bala to take his medication too!