

The Big Four at St John's in the Fifties

by

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I was at St John's College, Jaffna from 1948 to 1957. It was a time of change not only at school but in the national sphere. The country had gained independence in Feb 1948 after nearly 31/2 centuries of foreign rule. The world had just come out after a debilitating world war which ended in 1945. Sri Lankans were gradually taking over the reigns of power and leadership from the English. But whatever changes that took place were evolutionary rather than revolutionary. I thank God for that. There is no substitute for gradual and planned changes from a system that had served people well up to a time when changes are necessitated due to circumstances and policy changes.

It was as well that SJC had Rev J T Arulanantham to guide its destiny at that time. He also had a band of senior school teachers who were dedicated to their work and the welfare of the college. That which a school really impresses on its students is the memory and example of powerful personalities, a Principal with a vision and zeal and teachers who stimulate intellectual curiosity and love in their students for the subjects they are taught. Of these, the senior staff who together with their Principal (Rev Arulanantham) did much to make life pleasant and profitable to the students and who had been responsible for the tone of the college for nearly the whole of their working life, were Mr P T Mathai, Mr E M Ponnudurai and Mr K Subramaniam.

When I look down on memory lane and ponder over the nearly half a century that has elapsed since I left school, I have to acknowledge the debt I and several other generations of Johnians of that period owe to these men. They were known as the Big Four of SJC. While paying a tribute to them, I wish to draw pen pictures of the Big Four to the Johnians who studied there after these men had retired.

Rev J T Arulanantham: Rev Arulanantham took over the Principalship when Rev Peto was drowned in June 1940. It was not an easy task to step into the shoes of one who had been held in high esteem by all and sundry. But JT as he was affectionately referred to, took to the tasks and challenges in his own inimitable manner and showed early in his career as principal that the mantle of Elijah which had fallen on Elisha was resting on his shoulders in a most acceptable manner.

It was JT who really transformed St John's into an all island school. It was he who introduced HSC (later AL) and University Entrance classes at the college. Hitherto, students had to go to Colombo to pursue their higher studies. But with the introduction of the AL classes, St John's started producing excellent results and the process of students leaving SJC in pursuit of higher studies was reversed and soon a number of students from the south were flocking into SJC, including from prestigious Colombo schools. In the 1950s and beyond that, our college continued to produce some of the best results in the island. SJC came to be known as one of the finest institutions for excellence in education and JT was the pioneer responsible for it. St John's had had fine traditions and good training from the time of Thompson and Peto, but it was JT who made SJC into an all island school preparing students up to their University entrance. Thompson was the architect who conceived the modern St John's and laid the foundations for it; Peto was the builder who built on these foundations and gave the noble traditions and body for the college; JT was the finisher who completed the work started, enlarged and embellished it and brought it to completion.

JT's contributions to SJC was not only in the academic field. When he took over as Principal, the college lacked good buildings. He soon put this right. During his tenure, the Centenary Science Block was built which resulted in the procession of our students going from this building into the science faculties and laboratories of Sri Lanka and in the outside world.

JT also renovated the Williams Hall; it was during his time that the construction of the dining hall, sick room, the acquisition of the old Girls' college premises, the Memorial hostel, the Lower school building and a number of classrooms took place, as well as the purchase of the theatre opposite the school and modified to be used as another hostel (presently the Jaffna Academy building). The boundary wall around the college was also built during his time and he went outside the boundaries of SJC in purchasing houses which became available for sale on the periphery of the school. It should be remembered that when the school became a private non-fee levying institution in the early sixties, it ran into deep financial burdens and the sale of these houses saved our college from going under. How thankful we are today that SJC went private when we see the standards of government schools deteriorating. It is appropriate that when the Science block was badly damaged during the IPKF shelling and had to be demolished to make way for another new building, it was named after Rev J T Arulanantham. At present it is the most majestic and imposing of the buildings in the college. It is a 3 storeyed block housing all the lecture rooms as well as the laboratories required by the AL students. Truly can the epitaph written for Christopher Wren at St Paul's Cathedral in London be applied to J T Arulanantham – "*Si monumentum requiris, conspice*" (if you want to see his monument, look around).

As a principal he was always approachable. His was a strong personality and he ruled with a firm hand. But his justice was tempered with mercy. His dealings with students showed his grasp of the psychology of the individual as may be expected from one who had a degree in Psychology from London University. His success in administration was due to the fact he shared the burden of office with the Vice Principal and senior teachers. With Mr P T Mathai he formed a perfect Principal-Vice Principal combination. The latter was known for his strict discipline and students respected him through their awe and fear of the man. JT was respected and loved by his students. As Principal he did not have to teach any subjects but when the college did not have a chaplain for some time, he taught Scripture as a subject for the AL classes. I was one of the few who benefited thus. The subject was of no consequence for the University entrance exam but his teaching of the epistles of St Paul still forms the basis of my knowledge of those epistles, almost a half a century later!

When he passed away in June 1964, multitudes of old boys who loved him deeply felt it was the end of an era. I remember talking to Danny Champion (my classmate from form 1) about his death and how we compared our feelings with those of Tom Brown (in Tom Brown's Schooldays) when his former Principal at Rugby, Dr Thomas Arnold died. Danny and I had been in the same class in form 2 when that book was our text book for English. We found it difficult to believe that such a larger than life figure could vanish so suddenly from our midst. Rev Arulanantham's grave is flanked on either side by the graves of two other great principals, Rev Peto and Mr C E Anandarajan, at the St John's church cemetery. He was truly a man sent from God, and it is not strange that his name too was John (see John 1: 6).

In retrospect, I can still visualise and see in my mind's eye, JT walking across the cricket grounds from his bungalow towards Williams Hall for morning assembly, in his white cassock with the black cloak fluttering in the breeze. What an orderly thing of beauty that morning assembly was. All the students seated in the main body of the hall and the staff in their seats on stage and the prefects and monitors strutting up and down the centre aisle and sides while waiting for the Principal to arrive. And when he took his place on stage everybody stood up and the assembly started with a hymn, followed by prayers. A talk by one of the staff midway was followed by announcements. At the end of the assembly, the students marched out in order of class to music.

A measure of Rev Arulanantham's success as principal can be gauged from the fact that when he took over as principal of SJC, the school had a number of 440 on roll after 117 years of existence. When he retired 17 years later, the number was over 1200 and that too because it was purposely kept down to keep to an optimum number. I think the number on roll today is around 1500. By any measure of standard, JT was a great principal and he will rightly go down as one of the three architects of modern St John's together with Thompson and Peto.

Mr P T Mathai: Mr P T Mathai was a proud and patriotic son of India who nevertheless gave the best years of his life in service to St John's. He started teaching there in 1921 and retired as principal in 1959. Before that he had been vice principal for 5 years. His retirement brought to a close the Arulanantham period, one of the most satisfying chapters in Johnian history. SJC was in the forefront in studies and sports and the success of the school may be attributed to the leadership given by the JT- PT combination. PT was an excellent administrator whose personality demanded respect and got it. JT commanded the respect due to his astute leadership and benevolent outlook. Between the two, they led a good team of dedicated staff.

PT as he was popularly known was one of the most thorough and dedicated teachers SJC had ever had. He taught me English and Mathematics in the OL class and I can vouch for his conscientiousness and hard work. His methods of teaching, especially to remember certain facts (eg Mathematical formulae and the spelling of difficult and tricky English words) were incomparable. He was always meticulously dressed in his trousers, coat and tie. He expected everybody to follow suit in being neatly dressed. He was a stern disciplinarian and detested shirkers. He could not bear to see pieces of paper lying about and if he could not find anyone to pick it up, and if he could not see a dustbin to throw it in, he would put it in his pocket to be disposed of later! He

paid great attention to detail and always insisted on dotting an i and dashing a t, being a perfectionist. But behind a stern appearance lay a very compassionate **heart**. When there was an influx of students after the 1958 riots from the south, he admitted them without the customary tests and had temporary classrooms built to accommodate them. The number on roll went beyond 1600.

He was a good practicing Christian and was well known in YMCA and SCM circles. He used to have a morally edifying verse or sentence (usually from the Bible) written on a blackboard and display it opposite the assembly hall so that everybody could see it. The sentences were changed daily and called the thought for the day. Occasionally he will ask a student to repeat the thought for the day and therefore everybody took pains to learn these by heart! He was very courteous and welcomed anybody, be he a student, friend or foe, with a hearty "Good morning" or "Good evening" or whatever and pity the student who failed to respond! In his younger days he was a good tennis player and was the college staff champion for several years. He led others by his example of rectitude, devotion to duty, diligence to work and singleness of purpose and left behind an indelible imprint of his personality and character on all who came across him. Those who studied under him will never forget him.

Mr E M Ponnudurai and Mr K Subramaniam: Mr E M Ponnudurai and Mr K Subramaniam were the other two members of the quartet who formed the Big 4 of SJC in the decade of the fifties. I am taking them together as they were the "variable inseparables" of St John's, to use a mathematical term. At most college functions and in the staff room, they were seen together, and one cannot imagine two persons of such different characteristics hitting it off so well together as they did. EMP as Mr Ponnudurai was generally referred to, was a picture of sartorial elegance who liked to greet, meet, dress and eat in western style. He was an ardent Christian and at ease only in the English language; his love was for science and his pet subjects were Botany and Zoology which he taught in the higher forms. He taught me Algebra and Geometry in form 2 and I still remember the actions he used and the methods he adopted to get us word perfect in enunciating the four sets of conditions necessary and sufficient for two triangles to be congruent! He had been an excellent sportsman in his younger days, excelling in cricket, football and tennis. He had in fact scored one of the early centuries for St John's. He served as secretary of games or was in the sports committee for a number of years. His services to sports at SJC have been commemorated by the E M Ponnudurai pavilion, a series of tiered steps abutting the boundary wall from the Principal's bungalow to the Chaplain's quarters.

We have seen that three of the Big 4 were affectionately referred to by their initials. Mr Subramaniam's nickname was "Kadavul" and in my younger days I thought it stood for his initial K, for the sobriquet was so apt, and even now I cannot think of a better person to whom it will fit better! He was very well known in educational circles in Jaffna but I am sure if someone had been asked if he knew Subramaniam of St John's, the answer would have been hesitant, but if he had been asked if he knew Kadavul of SJC, the answer would have been a definite yes! Mr Subramaniam was also well dressed in his spotlessly white *verti*, national and shawl; he was a devout Hindu and a vegetarian. He was an Arts man to his core and equally conversant in Tamil, English and Latin, any of which he could have taught at university level. But he was known for his versatility in the Tamil language and its literature of which he was an authority. He was almost solely responsible for the renaissance of our mother tongue at St John's. He taught me Tamil at OL level and there was no question of his love and fervour for the subject. Anyone could teach a subject well where the student himself is attracted to it. But the hallmark of a great teacher is where he could create such an interest in a student in a subject which had been a bugbear to the student, that the student on his own will pursue and research into the subject for his own pleasure. Kadavul fitted into that category. Who can ever forget the way he taught the OL text book for Tamil literature "Veeramanagar" - the alliterations and the rhythmic language of R P Sethupillai in it still reverberating in my ears after more than 50 years!

A lovable trait of both Mr Ponnudurai and Mr Subramaniam was that whenever a new student joined the college, each in his own inimitable way would question the newcomer as to his genealogy and his family relationship to the college, EMP to find out whether the newcomer had sporting blood and instincts and Kadavul to familiarise himself with the student. D Canaganayagam the famous batsman of the fifties was "discovered" like this by EMP. Both EMP and Kadavul had a hearty sense of humour and they were always found seated together at cricket and football matches. Nothing pleased them more to crack a joke at each other's expense. If EMP was the custodian of Johnian sports and a raconteur par excellence on sports lore, Kadavul was the sole architect of Hindu-Christian amity at St John's, which is part of the college traditions. He strongly reminds one of Mr Chips in that wonderful story of school life "Goodbye Mr Chips".

If any Johnian of the fifties were asked to write an article about the "most unforgettable character I have met", the chances are he will select either Mr Ponnudurai or Mr Subramaniam. Both of them were responsible for shaping the careers and characters of countless Johnians. Reference has already been made to the J T Arulanantham block and E M Ponnudurai pavilion commemorating the services those two stalwarts. The P T Mathai block used for Arts and Craft, is a memorial to his work at SJC. It is a serious shortcoming that there is no building to remind us of the work of Mr Subramaniam.

I have discussed this with several old boys who had studied at his feet, and each and every one of them wholeheartedly agreed that something must be done. Funds may be a problem, but as an interim measure I suggest that a wing be added to the existing library, or the books in the present library be re-arranged to house all the Tamil books in one section and name it the "K Subramaniam Tamil Section". If we fail to commemorate his services, we will be guilty of not keeping our trust with the past.

Rev Arulanantham retired in 1957 followed by Mr P T Mathai in 1959. Mr Subramaniam retired in 1960 followed by Mr Ponnudurai in 1961. Thus within 4 years, the Big 4 of SJC who had been as familiar a scene as the mahoganies that fringed the college premises, and had walked as tall, had left it after well nigh four decades of service, the last of which they dominated. It took the college some time to recover from this loss and the staff room was never the same again. These four had set the tone of the college and moulded the characters of generations of Johnnians. They were responsible for policies which saw to it that each student was given an all round education. For example, students at OL who wanted to do science subjects at the AL, had to do History or Geography at the OL exam and students who wanted to do an arts course at AL had to do Physics and Chemistry or Botany and Zoology for the OL. Every student also had to participate in some sports programme and other extra curricular activity. These led to a well rounded education in which academic and sporting abilities were encouraged and inculcated – *"mens sana in corpore sano"* (a healthy mind in a healthy body).

The traditions of our college going back to more than 180 years, have nurtured in the old boys a sense of loyalty and devotion that is unique. A lot of credit goes to the various principals and teachers who had taught there and brought about this close relationship. I know that the past pupils of any school have a love for their alma mater, but I am chauvinistic enough to believe that affection which old boys of SJC have for their old school is something special. I have discussed this with several of them and they share my views. 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 the reason for this filial devotion but I know it to be a fact. It is this same sense of devotion which made the Principal and staff carry on with the schoolwork under trees at Kilinochchi during the exodus of 1995-96, writing one of the most glorious chapters in the history of the school. It is the same loyalty which makes many old boys comfortably settled in Australia and other western countries to plan a trip to Jaffna to help in some way 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 Chundikuli Girls' College. I am digressing from my subject matter in this concluding paragraph. There is a reason and that is this article is being written on the eve of the merger between the OBA of SJC and the OGA of CGC in Victoria. That the past pupils of these two schools have similar attitudes towards their alma maters is not surprising and 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. Our history is inter-twined and our leaders did a wise thing in making both institutions private. The well known Tamil adage advises its young men **"thirai kadal odiyum thiraviam thedu"**. Johnnians are lucky that they did not have to sail the seven seas to seek their treasure – most found their **"thiraviangal"** just across the road at CGC! Therefore this idea to merge the two associations is one that gives much satisfaction to past pupils of both schools. It is my conviction that one will not survive without the other, just as much as one school will not survive without the other. Long live their association!