

## Reminiscences

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‘*M*an proposes, God disposes’, a very old adage indeed and how very

true too. After going through a harrowing set of physical endurance tests and other sundry examinations for the post of the NCC officer of the Women’s wing of NCC cadets at the University, I had finally tasted the bitter-sweet fruit of success. Bitter because the experience itself was physically challenging especially for a person leading comparatively a quiet, sedate life. And sweet because success of any kind in any form is always welcome and more so here as I had emerged as the only selected candidate out 200 aspirants. So then choice for me was: to go to Gwalior for the NCC training and plunge into new profession or to go to Pilani to join my husband!!

The final choice was ultimately made in favour of Pilani for I had simply irrevocably fallen in love with the place, with all its big and small inconveniences and inaccessibilities, altogether a new way of life, new surroundings and the greenery of the lush, green velvety lawns and the bountiful earth. It is difficult to believe now but it is true – one needed just to plant any vegetable, and simply water the patch regularly. And lo and behold; one had to reap the rich yields then! Radishes and onions, the biggest sizes ever. Of course, the menace of peacocks was not so pronounced at that time.

It is said that nothing is permanent except change and so it was in Pilani too. What was life then in Pilani during 1960s, 1970s and most of 1980s? Quite different. That is though the essential pattern is still the same but there is certainly a gradual change in almost all spheres of life from what it was then. Be it the availability of fresh vegetables (I mean the green ones) or as mundane as bread, butter and eggs; the staple diet of breakfast for most of us or for that matter, fancy items like one’s favourite brand of toilet and detergent soaps. Cooking gas was made available to us in the early seventies and what a boon it was! Thanks to the gargantuan efforts of some senior teachers including that of my husband’s.

Information sharing in those days was done in the most ingenious ways. With no telephones in every house like we have now, for information dissemination we had other more informal (and extremely effective too) channels of gathering the juiciest pieces, nay, the choicest items of information; one of the channels being ‘word of mouth’. Where? How? In the weekly meetings of the Women’s Club, or in the ‘Chit-Chat’ sessions of the housewives after their husbands had left for the Institute and also the weekly *Akhanda Paath* sessions. Sometimes, the pace of such *Paaths* had to be increased and made much



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faster to save time and give enough opportunity to the members attending the *Paath* to go home, cook and be ready to go the movie. Due apologies to God were made for expediting the *Paath*. The fact that we, the members of the staff who lived in the *Vidya Vihar* Campus then had to find and create our own ways of entertainment had also made many of us quite creative beings.

I think it was in the late 1960s that we had the opportunity to witness Hindi films in the open air QT of FD II. Days when the movies were to be screened were neither fixed nor announced. But everyone used to come to know about it through 'word of mouth'. No seating arrangements were made. We had to sit on the grass or take a seat on the stone steps. Incidentally, then only one set of steps was there. It was much later that the three other sets of symmetrical steps were added. The movies that were screened were neither new nor interesting. Coloured movies were not made till 1970s. So it used to be a black and white movie. Nonetheless, all of us enjoyed watching these. It used to be a special occasion to complete all routine jobs at home quickly and be there at the Q.T. if I recall correctly, at sharp 7.30 pm. In warmer weather it was O.K. There was no menace of mosquitoes in those days. One did learn in how many different postures one could sit for almost three and a half or even four hours. Movies weren't that long but 'power supply' even then played hide and seek with us. Most of us began by sitting cross-legged and then took to spreading our feet in front, then folding them back (doing *bajra aasana*). I witnessed different kind of postures in which one could sit on the grass. Horizontal, vertical, lying flat on the grass, propping one's head on one hand and so on. A few enterprising students also sat behind the screen. Perhaps viewing a movie from the back of the screen had a different charm of its own. How I envied some of those students in trying out newer, more innovative postures where convention forbade us in experimenting with newer ways of sitting. Whether the movie was boring or interesting didn't matter to anyone of the viewers. Everyone sat through it. It was later in the 1970s and 1980s such movie shows became a regular feature of BITS campus life. Two separate shows were arranged in the Central auditorium. The students got the top priority and the staff the next. Seats were reserved for the MB girls on the balcony with a watchman guarding the seats as assiduously and meticulously as the cat is ferociously vigilant with her newborn kittens! No one dared to occupy the so-called reserved seats.

Often one noticed a line of girls, two girls in each line, talking and giggling, walking from the girls' hostel towards the auditorium on Sundays when a movie was being screened. This line had one matron in front and another one at the rear end! The girls hostel comprised just one block of eighty rooms or so. The number of girls was few, about 30-35 I think and they did lead a very 'sheltered and protected hostel life' with high boundary walls all around; one main gate in front and a small gate at the back. Every girl was expected to be in the hostel by 7 pm then. Both these gates had a watchman; each on guard round the clock. One of the interesting topics among the male students'



conversation sometimes had been the challenge of scaling the high, boundary walls of the girls' hostel. Boys called the girls' hostel a fortress. No one ever tried meet to this challenge of course. At present there are ten such blocks, two three-storied and one boys' hostel has been recently converted into a girls' hostel. And the number of girls now has increased to 1200. We expect this number to increase in the coming years.

A few enterprising and enthusiastic students used to put up English and Hindi plays – all male cast, with boys enacting the female roles, that too done superbly. Each of these clubs had a Professor-in-charge who was a theatre-enthusiast himself. I recall it was in early seventies when girls ventured to act in these plays. The duties of the Prof.-in-charge included the entire supervision of the rehearsals, especially during late nights and also escorting the girls back to their hostel. In 1973, the English Drama Club was staging an American one-act play called 'Cancer' in which my elder daughter was doing an important role. She was the only day-scholar; the other girl in the play was a hostel inmate. After a few days of being with the students and the rehearsals, my husband who was the Professor-in-charge of EDC then decided to do away with this practice of 'supervisory duty' of the Prof.-in-charge ship. He not only had implicit faith in the students' integrity but also believed that as mature adults who undertook every responsibility associated with the staging of the play—direction, stage setting, costume designing, acoustics, etc. etc. – should be made wholly in-charge of the entire job. And how correct he proved to be too. But the untiring efforts of these dedicated students were often marred by a set of miscreants, whom I shall call 'professional hooters' for want of a more appropriate adjective. The sole job of this set of boys was to hoot and jeer throughout the play being put up, whether it was in English or in Hindi. It was very difficult to hear the dialogues properly unless one sat in the first or the second row in the auditorium. No one understood why they acted in this obnoxious manner.

Prof. Madhusudan Singh of the Language Group, a real theatre lover, had put in a lot of efforts to produce a Greek Classic 'Antigone' by Sophicles. A decision was taken to stage this play for exclusively theatre enthusiasts in the Engineering Theatre instead of the auditorium. Invitations were issued selectively, to both staff and students. The iron-grill shutter for entry into FD II was duly locked. The play began and we were all engrossed as the play was going on. But this was not to be! The 'hooters' had gathered in large numbers near the closed shutter and had started shouting slogans. Their demand was to let them in, and allow any one and every one access to the venue and give each of them full freedom to do whatever they wanted. The capacity for seating students was limited in the ET. And letting all these miscreants in would mean complete chaos. Prof. Singh was naturally very upset and so were the actors and actresses. They all wound up their stage materials and quietly left for their respective hostels without completing the play. Many of us were shocked and sat there dumbfounded—only two scenes had been enacted and it was going to be an exquisite portrayal the age gone by. Gradually such an attitude of the 'hooters' changed into a saner one. I don't know what 'charisma' helped the 'hooters' to



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become avid and sincere play-watchers. But this is one change we all heartily welcomed as watching plays being put up became thoroughly enable. And then we had a gala time putting up plays with a mixed cast consisting of teachers and students. Several Hindi and English plays were staged in this manner.

Once, the Staff Association decided to put up a Hindi play, with as many members of the staff as possible participating in it. There were a number of one-line dialogues too in the play. The director of the play (a very senior faculty member) was very strict—he wanted us the actors, actresses to be word-perfect, accent perfect and of course have appropriate expressions. It was for the first time that some of the staff members had agreed to be on the stage and also act. They were naturally very stage-conscious and very shy to boot. The rehearsals were great fun as we, who had acted in plays many times derived vicarious pleasure from the utter discomfiture of the newcomers while on stage. The director of the play had threatened me innumerable times that he would fix a tape on my mouth, if I didn't control my constant giggling during rehearsals. I found a way out only on the final day. Instead of making eye contact with the characters while delivering dialogues, I was on stage with; I looked somewhere else. No eye contact, no shyness, no giggles.

In retrospect, what are the tangible changes in life here at Pilani for us all? Many I guess. But it is difficult for those who have come during the last few years to understand that there was only one bus in the morning and one in the afternoon to go out of Pilani or return. There are now a variety of vehicles all waiting to take you out of Pilani, at any time. Almost all brands of toilet items, savouries, biscuits, cold drinks, etc. are readily available, at the supermarket or other shops. One can place an order for a book or any item of their choice at the supermarket and procure it in due course of time. Clothes too one can buy in any of the shops outside the campus that have mushroomed over the years keeping in mind the latest trends in fashion. I also know that the tailoring charges are cheaper too and it is possible to dictate to the tailor as to what and how you want a particular garment to be stitched and this too without any extra charge. All these changes are welcome and many more would take place in future too I believe.

Then is there something that we do miss now? I think, it is gloating in 'self-martyrdom' of what could be but what wasn't. In this existed the readily available camaraderie of students in a great measure. We had come to do a job and had voluntarily chosen this 'OASIS' as our new abode. The few among us who pined for brighter lights and the hubble and bubble of metropolises left Pilani. But I do pity the students; they had to stay on here for their studies but they did miss the joys of big city life. Perhaps we all are nostalgic for the sake of nostalgia itself. We were happy then and we are happy now. I wholeheartedly agree with Pt. Nehru when he said, "Happiness and work are really wedded together, for there can be no true happiness without the feeling that one is doing something worthwhile." This we had in ample measure then, as we do have now.



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