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*St. Stephen's
in
Our Times*

Reminiscences of St. Stephen's College
by Old Students, Former Teachers and some others
written on the occasion of the Centenary of the College
1 February 1981

Editor
HARISH TRIVEDI

SHEKHAR SINGH 1967-73

Born 1950. *Old Student*, 1967-72: B.A. (Hons.) in English, M.A. in Philosophy. *Lecturer in Philosophy*, 1972-73. Later, Lecturer at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong; since 1980, Lecturer at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi.

St. Stephen's, in my days, was most notable for the quality of its humour. Though the task of creating jokes and puns was confined to a small number of wits, there was an ever-present and appreciative audience only too willing to spread the cheer. Original 'lobs' (their propagators having been promptly named 'lobsters') were forthcoming on every occasion. Most often these were at the expense of (or sometimes at the expense of) a specific Stephanian and, therefore, somewhat contextual. Nevertheless, many were priceless and worth preserving.

Ever since the sixties, two printed college magazines were making irregular appearances. These were *Onset* and the College Union Society's *Kooler Talk*. Since the sixties, then, all the jokes that were printable, whatever their origin, sooner or later found their way into one of these two journals. There was also *Spice*, a cyclostyled paper brought out on occasion by the Wodehouse Society.

As could be expected, there was fierce competition between these journals. I remember *Kooler Talk* (or *Katy*, as it was fondly called) launching the campaign by bringing out a full-page advertisement: "Be a nonconformist: read *Onset*." *Onset* retorted, though not in print, by describing *Katy* as "the magazine which prints jokes that read like a College Union report, and a College Union report that reads like a joke".

The senior members were, as it ought to be, the butt of many jokes. Two of the College Chaplains come to mind: Rev. O'Connor and Rev. Hiscock. The former, I recollect, was popularly known as 'The Vampire', perhaps because of his over-enthusiastic support for the Red Cross Blood Bank. The latter gave rise to a whole new school of humour, mainly unprintable, but preserved in the 'Rev. Hiscock Archives', under the curatorship of Swashpawan Singh.

In the early and mid-seventies there was an epidemic among the newly joined senior members of the College of sitting for the competitive examina-

tions. Many a student was neglected and many a class not taken. *Katy*, never the one to forget or forgive, summed it all up by awarding

Order of Ye Olde Skipper: To Mr. H.K. Singh, who had an exam to take, but forgot that his students had exams to take too. *Ground Colours*: To his students, who were in a class by themselves.

(*Kooler Talk*, Vol. XI, No. 6)

The Lord Ickenham Teacher Impersonation Competition, organised yearly by the Wodehouse Society, was always a big draw. I have witnessed, over the years, outstanding imitations of Mr. Dwivedi, Mr. Rajpal, Mr. Shankland and Dr. Brijraj Singh: each a hot favourite. But perhaps the most memorable of the 'Ickenhams' featured Benjamin Gilani and Amitabh Pande showing us how various Senior Members would bark, if they could bark!

But it was not, as one might suppose, all one-sided. The senior members of the College were no less at this game. The exploits of David Gosling, perhaps the foremost among the Senior jokers, are legend and too many and too varied to be recounted here. As tutor of Mukherji East he would, I'm told, very often 'borrow', in their absence, the complete beddings of his wards. When these wards, in all innocence, would appear in his room to report the theft they would, more often than not, find their mattress and quilt tacked to his wall.

I remember having coffee one night with a Resident Tutor. Register had been slipped in and was lying near the door. Somewhere during our conversation we became aware of a strange scratching sound and, looking around, saw that an anonymous but enterprising Stephanian was trying to pull the register out again from under the door, using a straightened hanger. We both watched his efforts for a while but the register was clearly out of reach. Finally, with a sigh, the tutor rose and, walking softly, pushed the register nearer so that it could be dragged out. We continued our conversation as if nothing had happened.

So many names and faces come to mind, each with their own speciality. I think of M. Raghunathan and Madan Lokur, both fond of practical jokes, of Vinaysheel Oberoi (Mooli), who must have been the most talented punster of College. I think of Manjit Singh and Peter Lugg, of Ravi Dubey, Amit Jayaram, Vivek Srivastava and the Khullar brothers, as also of Vinayshil Gautam and Deepak Vohra who were the butt of so many jokes.

There are so many ways of being funny, be it limericks, puns or debating interjections; be it prose or poetry or even writings on the wall. There was no limit to Stephanian scribes but the one I remember with most fondness is Prakash. Born modestly, and anonymously, in 1963, and exposed to the world one September morning, the onset of Prakash's influence was totally metre-oric. By the time he rode away into the sunset, in the early seventies, he had versted all his opponents and left them bereft of rhyme or reason.

Prakash's interests were diverse and his mind verse-atile. His style was con-verse-ational and his wit, ~~and~~ its verse, never per-verse. From games—

*The chaps who understand the play
 Will often make a slam
 Where others not as bright as they
 Go badly down oh damn.
 Myself who dwell beside the Ridge
 Impaled on Cupid's dart
 When I complete a four at bridge
 I always bid a heart*

*Her father and her mother, see,
 Would give a man the grumps.
 The two of them are eyeing me,
 And muttering "No Trumps!"
 It's unimportant. Love I trust
 To play the stronger part:
 And if they mutter till they bust
 I still shall bid a heart. (Versc I & 5, Onset, 31)*

to different games:

*In College there are champions at half a dozen games—
 The heroes of the playing fields, the idols of the dames. . .
 Now games are not the only things, and studies matter too,
 And sober scholars garner facts and stick to them like glue.
 To understand the ultimate, to seize the inner sense,
 Must always be a challenge to the trained intelligence.
 Historians have causes, economists have rules
 —A lot of them are clever chaps and some are bloody fools—
 And chemists grind a powder with a mortar and a pestle
 To study a reaction, but they don't know how to wrestle.
 Stephanians are dutiful, indiscipline they hate.
 Although the midnight bell has tolled, they do not jump the gate.
 They go to all their classes. They never touch a drink
 Or greet a passing beauty with a speculative wink.
 Their lives are irreproachable, and no one could suppose
 They hide an inner weakness that I shudder to disclose.
 The truth is inescapable. I make a full confessional
 (You want to bet there's no such word?): they don't know how to wrestle*

*If I'd a lady tutor who was beautiful and young,
 To teach me the refinements of the tricky English tongue,
 I'd so arrange our classes that we'd always be alone,
 And I would barricade the door and disconnect the phone.
 And we would lay aside our books and concentrate our thoughts,
 And wear a costume minimal of snugly-fitting shorts.
 And I would gaze into her eyes, and in her arms I'd nestle,*

And say 'To hell with English, darling. Teach me how to wrestle.'

(from "Kushti", *Onset* 49 & 50, December 1967)

In this inimitable style Prakash laid bare the innermost fantasies of all Stephanians, thereby paving the way for the introduction of lady tutors into the College.

In a similar strain, while under a similar strain, are his "Thoughts from a Swimming-Pool":

*Journey with me to the magical pool—
College aquatics are thriving,
Masculine mischief is playing the fool,
Girls are discreetly arriving.
Sinewy girls that I dream of at night—
Wonderful swimmers? You're probably right.
Whether I'm sober or whether I'm tight
I like 'em best when they're diving*

*Smooth are the swimsuits and snugly they fit.
Tribute to woman's contriving.
What a sensation if some of them split;
That would be truly reviving.*

*Girl after girl on the flexible plank,
Rattle and bang and they're into the tank.
Plenty of action—and plenty to spank;
I like 'em best when they're diving.*

*Classical Neptune, the god of the sea,
Ever delighted in driving
Over the foam with a nymph on his knee,
Dozens of others conniving.
If you are square and a bit of a prude
Possibly you will consider him rude;
He was in favour of nymphs in the nude
It's a thought, you know.*

(from *Onset*, 47, September, 1967).

Lest you be led to believe that Prakash mainly had sex on his mind, let me quote from "Lullaby New Style":

*Softly, sleep softly, O child at my breast!
Don't be affected by Student Unrest.
Sixteen or seventeen years to the dot
You'll be in College and busy with what?
Will you be reading, or kicking up hell?
Only the stars in their courses can tell.
Cling to me, sing to me, safe in your nest!*

Don't be affected by Student Unrest.

*Father of course will be paying, and he
Hopes that you'll manage a decent degree.*

*Father assures us that College will show
What you are made of, and Father should know.*

Rock-a-bye baby abundantly blest!

Don't be affected by Student Unrest.

*Father himself, you'll be sorry to hear,
Didn't do much in his College career,
How it all happened I cannot conceive
After a fortnight they asked him to leave.*

Never refer to it, even in jest!

Don't be affected by Student Unrest... .

*Should you grow up to be rather a clot:
Say very little, you beautiful blot!
If you are silent, my scintillant star,
No one will know what a noodle you are!*

Listen to Mother, for Mother knows best;

Don't be affected by Student Unrest!

(from *Onset* 39, October 1966)

Similarly, Prakash had a soft spot for "The Debaters":

*How often in this world of sin
Our fondest hopes decay
The Gods are blind, or Fate unkind,
And so we lose the day.*

*Our best attempts at chess are null,
Our cricketers extremely dull;
In hockey it's Kirori Mal
Who bear the prize away.*

*How nice to know, as on we go
Towards the golden gate
Of Heaven, where the trumpets blare
And smiling angels wait
To show us to our seats, that we,
However bad at games we be,
Can always gain the victory
In trials of debate.*

*Our splendid chaps, to cheers and claps
And clatter of renown,
Are tearing rents in arguments,
And howling people down;
And meeting yell with counter yell,
And saying their opponents smell,*

And burning up the town.

(from *Onset* 35, February 1966)

The otherwise bleak prospect of returning from vacations was brightened up with the anticipation of Prakash's tales, for he always had some experiences to recount.

*When College reopens and lecturers fuss,
And students return to the station,
A thing that a lot of us like to discuss
Is how we have spent the vacation.
We've all had adventures, it's easy to see,
And now I will tell you a stoorie
Of something exciting that happened to me—
The girl that I met in Mussoorie.*

(from *Onset* 44)

In "Mussoorie Rejoinder", in the very next issue, writing for once under a pen name 'Shabash', Prakash said :

*Prakash no doubt is very right. Mussoorie girls are fine.
Their glances set the heart afire; their kisses burn like wine.
But here in Delhi it is hot, and by the gods above
I swear to you that I require a cooler kind of love.
I waste away, I cannot eat, I cannot even drink—
The very thought of flaming passion makes a fellow shrink.
My shirt is sticking to my chest, my hair is out of curl—
O kindly introduce me to an airconditioned girl!
A rustle in the corridor, a footfall on the stair,
Announces the arrival of my human frigidaire. . .
The Spanish heat offends my ear; I find it hardly fun
To dream of girls in swimming-suits beneath a latin sun.
O rather sing the praises of the merry polar bear
That dives about among the bergs and doesn't turn a hair!*

Finally, towards the end of his carcering, Prakash managed to square the circle and perfect the style of prose-poetry. In *Onset* 51, early 1968, he described a sojourn to Calcutta (where he seduced the daughter of his host!) in the following terms :

The afternoon was going well, till suddenly disaster fell. For to a halt a taxi swept, and out of it her father stepped. Ignoring *Onset* save to say, "How dare you take the car away?" he stood beside the water's swirl and bellowed, "Come ashore, my girl!" And Pushpalata feared to come, because to put it plainly—hum—the fact is—well, it's past dispute, she hadn't got a swimming suit.

Imagine if you can the scene that followed. Never have we been so utterly bereft of speech. But Daddy wasn't; what a screech he gave, how

awful was his shout, as Pushpalata scrambled out! "I see it all!" he cried (how true!). "You baggage, I'm ashamed of you! I know that swimming keeps us fit, but this is over doing it!" He rushed her home, and made it plain that waiting for her was the cane and as for us, he thundered, "Louse! If ever you approach the house again, I'll beat you to a jelly!"

Deflated, we are back in Delhi.

But despite the seeming *bonhomie*, all was not well with Prakash. He was pen-sive, inde-scribe-ably confused, reacting ad-verse-ly to the hap-pen-ings around him. (I apologise for the spellings and for the tripe-writing). It was not that he was against change, for he was as much of a philosopher as the next man (we remember him standing, just a few years before, on the 'College side-lines', humming "Watching the trains come in;/Hearing the porters shout:/When we have watched all the trains come in,/We watch all the trains go out.")). He was against *this* type of change. Students will change, but must Old Students be forgotten? Principals will change, but must old principles be forgotten?

In what was perhaps Prakash's last appearance, we see the agony of his soul :

*Authority, try less hard
(We are meek, conservative students)
To hack in the old facade
Of our games, uncalled-for new dents!
Should a God from heaven appear
And meddle, we'd murmur, 'Curse it, He
Oughtn't to interfere
With the ways of the University!*

"The Chancellor's Trophy, or New Rhymes for
New Arrangements", last stanza, *Kooler Talk*, X : 1&2

Then one morning Prakash had disappeared. Frantic searches were instituted and a pun-itive expedition was sent across the road (and across many roads), but all to no avail. Volunteers from Stop the Change Forum (SCF), hurriedly set up at Prakash's disappearance, interviewed many a pierson but could not see through the myster-y.

And so we live with our pun-ishment, to wit, this sus-pen-ded animation, this rhyme-less void.