

## Memories of Life at the Duke of Gloucester School -Suniti Mohindra

School life, especially at the secondary level, is arguably most interesting and formative. From age 15 to 18, that is, one is bursting with youthful energy, when channeled by great teachers, it motivates one, among other things, to render service to society. Seeds thus planted by illustrious teachers -- with love, patience and untiring efforts -- sprout forth like fruit-laden mango trees. They provide not only nourishment, they give shade and shelter and provide comfort to 'man and beast.' For this gift of shaping student lives, we owe as much to our teachers as to our parents.

The gift of good teachers cannot be taken for granted; there are societies, as we have painfully found in recent years, where teachers are bent on warping and twisting student minds. The words "teacher" and "student" don't clearly apply where hate-mongers prevail, and besotted youth take their own lives amid mayhem. It is with great humility, then, that I acknowledge the gift God gave us at the Duke of Gloucester High School -- successor to the Government Indian High School and precursor to today's Jamhuri High School, Ngara Road, Nairobi.

I myself came to the Duke, in the last term of 1954, from New Delhi, where my parents had moved from Nairobi some years after I was born. We had gone to the finest private school there -- the Delhi Cambridge School, affiliated with Cambridge University. Our Principal, Mr. A. C. Deb, had hailed from Bengal; in the spirit of Bengal's freedom struggle, he taught us to be on the path of national service at the highest possible level. It was a little surprising, and most pleasant, that teachers at Duke were cast in the same mould -- with Kenya's struggle extrapolating so much from the Indian nationalist thrust. They, too, were keen to bring out the best in every one of their charges.

It is invidious to name names -- for there were so many good, even great, teachers at the Duke. But, what the heck, Mr. B. N Varma (our Maths teacher, fondly called "Thiri," for the way he enunciated the third numeral) was outstanding. He'd playfully pull my ear in reprimand for getting to class late. (I ran the school canteen; doing the accounts, as I wound up proceedings at the end of recess, delayed me by some minutes.) Equally great was Mr. D.N. Khanna (who taught us English); he'd mount projects to draw us into choosing a future profession. Then there was Mr. Balwant Singh ("Simba"), physical education instructor and General Scout Master.

Simba presided over fun; endless liberties we'd take on his watch. Even in the mischief we wrought, he'd encourage gusto; invention; courage; enterprise -- he'd benignly smile as we spread our fledgling wings. He and others saw to it that in the middle of fun and frolic, we were building character -- good, enduring, persevering character. Most of our teachers came from India; they instilled in us a sense of gratitude for what we had -- and others were denied in our parent culture. Memory teems with remembrances of science teachers; literature masters; language mentors -- our sense of gratitude to them is limitless. Deprivations in India, especially during colonial times, formed an important background against which one measured the denials to people of color under imperial thrall.

Another lesson in that regard was how some of our teachers -- Mr. Vasudevam comes to mind -- were treated by colonial Principals (for example, Mr. Amar). A student, "Charlie," took home some 30 books Masterji had entrusted him to deliver to the school library. Amar rebuked the teacher openly, and insisted that he make good. How was the poor master, fresh off the boat, going to do the Principal's bidding? I had the privilege to rise to the occasion and overnight supply the deficiency on the strength of a student collection. The Principal was as humbled as the teacher was amazed at the student response to the outrage.

My exploits ranged over organized debates and the annual oratorical contest; the top prizes won are etched in fond memory. We also staged a play, in which Naresh, Khanna Masterji's younger son, took part. (He and I met after 50 years recently; but the years in-between just melted away.) I rejoice remembering how five of us, Prem Sharma, Dharm Vir Kholi, and two others of our gang's singular bicycle trip to Entebbe and back; I recall also the the good times Duke students shared

with others at the annual Royal Agricultural Show. Memories of sports waft back: the Triangular Meets with Alliance High and the Prince of Wales; the hockey matches with other schools -- when Duke really excelled -- or the hard-fought cricket matches.

But these were serious times. The struggle for Kenya's independence was intensifying, even as the Mau Mau Emergency was lifted (in 1956). Around this time, the visit of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan had a special significance for us. The politics of it was obvious: as Vice President of India, he energized us to feel the warmth of the Indian struggle beckoning us to form part of the struggle in our adopted land. But there was more to it. He was a world-renowned scholar, an authority on one of the principal philosophical traditions of humankind -- Vedic (loosely termed Hinduism). Again, I had the opportunity to steward a rare gesture for, after all, our idol. We organized the showering of this noble man with a cascade of flowers as his motorcade wound through the dreary Ngara Road swamp known as the Nairobi River. I get goose bumps to this day when I recall how the visitor picked out and smiled broadly to the prime suspect who had got hoisted a boxful of petals across the electricity poles. Providently, the wire mechanism triggering the toppling of the box worked perfectly.

The editorial board is likely to prune the rest; so let me stop here and ask everyone of you to PLEASE send in your contribution. Hale GHS; hale Duke; hale Jamhuri High School -- we'll never forget!