

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

The letter bearing the information about my admission to Netarhat School reached my village address a month in advance. It also contained the prospectus of the school in English. The cover was of glossy art-paper with the photograph of the majestic Chalet, the summer resort of the Governor of Bihar in the 'good old days of the Raj'.

The receipt of this information turned me into a V.I.P. instantly. Ours was a joint family. I was the youngest among six brothers and sister. This had automatically conferred upon me the status — unwanted though — of the unofficial errand boy of the family. Now the scene changed. Everbody realised that I would be leaving the family-fold for a good six years and joining an elite school. So everyone wanted to make me feel happy in this brief period. Now I could make demands with reasonable hope that these would be fulfilled. Needless to say I enjoyed this new-found status tremendously.

Members of my family as well as the enlightened members of the community had vague ideas about Netarhat. India had achieved independence only seven years back. There was a great euphoria around. Any new scheme ushered in by the Government raised high hopes. Netarhat was one such scheme. Selection on the basis of three-tier competitive examinations and locating it in the old summer resort of the Governor, the Lat Saheb, let loose the wings of their imagination. The general belief was that this school had been set up to train future administrators right from their young days. This popular belief put quite a halo around my head. I am sorry to admit that a good bit of this halo entered into my head as well and I started strutting around like a puffed-up pigeon. This new status resulted in admiration by elders but loss of camaraderie among my friends.

The long list of clothing items and other accessories also helped in lending credibility to this presumption. No student in the known neighbourhood had required so many items. One item created quite a flutter. It was the 'Polo-necked Woollen Sweater'. My father was an avid polo player but had never worn a polo-necked sweater at the games. An open-collar shirt tucked into the old Jodhpurs had always stood him in good stead. Since no one was familiar with this

apparel, the European padre of the nearby Khalijor Catholic Mission was consulted. He informed that it simply meant a sweater with a high neck.

Since there was the requirement of a polo-necked sweater, my father assumed that the wearer would necessarily have to play polo after putting it on. My family prided in being a family of good horsemen. Now it became necessary to bring me up to the mark in this hazardous game to ensure that I did not sully the good name of the family. So, a crash course in polo was organised for me. It did prove to be a crash course - I crashed down quite a number of times. The exercise proved to be of no immediate relevance as the school did not have any horses. However, it paid me dividends when I joined the police eleven years later. It proves the old adage '*Na Hi Bandhya Saraswati*' (Learning never goes waste).

How to imbibe the proper style and manners of modern living was the next issue. We were rural folks. Though well-to-do, our lifestyle did not differ much in substance from that of our ploughmen. We ate on ground off the banana leaf or leaf plates showing our appreciation with loud sucking sounds. A belch after a meal to indicate to the host that the meal was a sumptuous one was very much in order. All this would not do in Netarhat! So, another crash course was devised to teach me proper table manners. This crash course was a much more pleasant one.

Ranchi, our District Headquarters, in those days, was one hundred and thirty miles from my village. It was a gruelling journey those days - the first 32 miles on horseback and the rest in an old jalopy on a bumpy road. Ranchi housed a very fine hotel run by the Railways called B.N.R. Hotel. It was located near the Ranchi Railway Station and I think it still stands there. This crash course was run there under the close supervision of my eldest brother. Fortunately he was an epicurean.

A suite was hired. I had a room for myself for the first time; and what a room! It had shining modern furniture and was carpeted all over. I was initiated into the rituals of the use of the water-closet, the shower and the bath. The different towels for different parts of one's anatomy were pointed out by the room-bearer, who had been appointed as the assistant instructor by Madan Bhaiya.

The bearer took to his role seriously. Perhaps for the first time

in his career his humble profession had been elevated to this height. He took great pains in explaining each and every point — how a table is laid; how to use the napkin; which knife and fork to be used for what dish; how to eat a fruit with a stone and how to dispose off the stone; how to place the fork and knife to indicate that one had finished the meal; etc. Madan Bhaiya took such a keen interest in the whole affair that it made me suspect that under the guise of a supervisor he was also undergoing the course as much as me. Both of us could have undergone this instruction for years gladly but alas! though the desire was strong the purse was limited. The course came to a close on the third day. We took leave of our instructor, who had acquired quite a professorial demeanour in the past three days, and came back home.

After this hectic preparation the long wait for the D-day started. According to the school letter, all boys belonging to Chhotanagpur Division were to collect at the Binodashram Hotel at Ranchi on 14th November 1954 and then proceed to Netarhat in a collective manner. Madan Bhaiya, however, had contacted Shri C.J. Napier, the first Principal, meanwhile and persuaded him to pick me and two other students — Krishna Kumar Nag and Kartik Chandra Bhagat — at Ghaghra, a midway location. He had agreed to the proposal.

On the appointed day all three of us left by the local bus for Ghaghra. Our fathers and Madan Bhaiya also came along to see us off. We waited for the school bus at the Ghaghra trijunction. The bus did not arrive by the scheduled hour and we were greatly disappointed. However, at about 5 P.M. a white van was seen approaching the town. A white man was at the wheel.

Madan Bhaiya flagged it down. It stopped and two persons stepped out from the front seats. The white man was the Principal himself. He was a middle-height man with a receding hairline, of stocky built, having clipped moustaches and brisk manners. He was dressed in an open-collar white shirt with sleeves rolled up, Khaki shorts, Khaki stockings and Pathan Chappals. He had a ruddy complexion. In short he appeared to be a 'Pucca Gora-Saheb', the type who built empires, banned suttee and hunted tigers.

We had a brisk session of introduction and handshakes. To our great surprise Shri Napier spoke to us in chaste Hindi though with

an accent. We were asked to put our steel trunks in the van and hop in. I got the privilege of riding in the front, ensconced between Shri Napier and the other gentleman, who was carrying a portable typewriter on his lap. Later I came to know that he was Shri Bannerjee, stenographer to the Principal.

Shri Napier was known to be a fast and fearless driver. Soon the van was tearing down the road and racing to meet the blue hills looming large on the horizon. Those days there was hardly any traffic on the Ghaghra-Netarhat road and the road was in good repair. Hence we had a smooth sailing and in no time we crossed the Koel causeway at Banari and started the ascent.

The sun had set. Darkness had crept in silently to fill up the void. Only the road and the roadsides were visible in the headlights of the van. There was dense forest on both sides. The narrow road winded through the forest. The van moved swiftly negotiating the narrow curves and sharp hairpin bends. It seemed we were passing through a green tunnel. Initially there was the bamboo forest. Tall bamboo on both sides leaned towards the road forming a beautiful arch. Now and then a rabbit or a fox would flit across the road to my delight. I was hoping to see some big game for which Netarhat was famous. But alas! all wishes are not fulfilled.

Midway up, the bamboo was replaced by tall and stately Sal trees. The density of the undergrowth made the darkness all the more thicker. Soon we were engulfed in a thick white fog. Visibility got reduced to about fifty feet. This, however, did not deter Shri Napier, who bashed on regardless.

Nothing was visible except the yellow tubes formed by the van's headlights and the small patch of road in the front. The altitude and the fog shot a chill down my spine. I wish I had the 'polo-necked sweater' on.

Soon the lights of Bungalow No. 4 were visible. Shri Bannerjee informed us that we were about to reach the school location. Within minutes we reached the gate of Shanti Ashram of the First set.

I could see the outline of the Ashram; the Sal tree in front of it and the pine clump near the bell-tower. In the floating fog it all seemed ethereal. I had heard similar descriptions of the paradise from my mother. Now I was face to face with it.

This is the place of my dreams, I thought. The earth is red, the trees are green, the air is cool and fresh, and the few men I have met so far are warm and caring. All things are just how they should be.

I fell in love with Netarhat instantly. It was love at first sight.

I have fallen in love at first sight only twice — with Netarhat and the girl whom I married later — and both have endured as life-long passions.

