

HEROES AND HEROINES

Netarhat School had been set up for promotion of excellence. All the boys had been selected for admission on the basis of merit. It would have been natural if the students, who excelled in studies, had been regarded as heroes by others. However, in reality it was not so. They were considered as Kks or Kitabi Keedas (book-worms) and were frowned upon by others if not downright looked down upon. Our heroes were outstanding athletes, players, singers and drama-artistes.

Hockey, football and basketball were played regularly. Regular playgrounds came up later. Initially we ourselves levelled the flat patches near our houses and started playing on them. Most of the boys knew the rudiments of football but were new to hockey and basketball. Those of us who belonged to Chhotanagpur were familiar with hockey. Gabriel Purty, who hailed from Khunti, was an accomplished hockey-player. He distinguished himself in inter-house matches and soon came to be known as 'Dhyan Chand' of Netarhat. When Shri D.P. Singh joined us as a teacher, hockey got a new fillip. He had been a national level player and coach. Under his guidance the school team's performance soared up. Soon we were playing inter-school matches. For State-level inter-district hockey matches our entire school team was nominated to represent the Palamau district without any trials.

Gabriel, Erik and Loreng soon got the hero status. Everyone marvelled at their dexterity and skill. Their friendship was most sought after.

What Gabriel was to hockey, Chandu and Narendra were to football. Chandu or Chandramohan played in the centre-forward position and Narendra played full-back. Whenever the ball came near them they drew lusty cheers. They seldom disappointed the spectators. Heading the ball was the speciality of Chandu. He could accurately anticipate the trajectory of the ball, pull his head back and then jerk it forward to hit the ball forcefully. It was as forceful as a kick and sent the ball spinning in the opposite direction. Every head made us clap and cheer.

Chandu was short and stocky with chubby features. He sported long and straight hair. His hair would fly up and down with every jerk of his head. Heading the ball, he made an adorable picture.

In contrast Narendra Singh was lean, thin and tall. I think he was the tallest among us. He had long ostrich-like legs, of which he made good use while tackling an invader. He could kick the ball halfway through. He had great endurance. In a match he was kicked in the groin by a player of the opposite team. It was a deliberate foul to put Narendra out of action. Poor Narendra doubled up with pain and rolled on the ground. After a few seconds he got up and resumed his position again. What was more important, he did not utter a foul word against the attacker nor tried to take revenge. His exemplary spirit of sportsmanship was remembered by all of us for long. For his forbearance, endurance and gentlemanliness, we started calling him 'Narendraje' instead of plain 'Narendra'.

Some sports enthusiasts set up 'The Netarhat Hill Club' and organised a football tournament. The tournament was played on the school playground. A number of teams participated in this event. These teams belonged to nearby towns like Latehar, Lohardaga and Gumla. These teams had full-grown adult players. Most of them were almost professionals. Against these Goliaths were pitted our Davids. Initially they were rather diffident but soon they rallied round and thrashed these teams soundly. As they could not match the power and thrust of these adult teams, they adopted the tactics of quick and short passes. Before an opponent could rush to tackle the player with the ball, it was passed on to the next player. The opposite team got exhausted running here and there in the first twenty minutes or so. Then the real assault on the opposite goal post was launched. Shri B.K. Sinha had coached the team well. Our team won the championship year after year. It was one of these matches in which Narendra had distinguished himself and won his 'elevation'.

Normally athletics were considered a notch lower than football and hockey but at the time of Annual Sports Meet its rating went up several notches higher. Long-distance runners were big heroes in our eyes. Erik Ekka stole the thunder in these meets. He was a relentless runner. He did not know fatigue. He could run down to Banari — 12 miles downhill — and run up without any stop. To

prepare for the meet he ran around the campus pushing a trundle cart. His steadfast and graceful performance earned him the sobriquet 'Human Locomotive' after the famous Olympian Zetopec.

Every week we had to go for a cross-country run. It was a long run. If you ran the full course you would cover more than ten kilometres. The starting point was the Oval. One had to run up to the High-Point Grove (the highest point of Netarhat) and then take the down-the-hill track to the agriculture-farm. Then one had to cross the village and reach the gate of the power-house. From there the climb started. Climbing upto the stretch by the side of the Bungalow No. 4, one joined the Main Road to the Oval.

The first and the last stretches were even. The downward track was easy but the climbing part was rather arduous and it came when one was almost exhausted. It was definitely an arduous course for a school-boy.

Even the good runners found it hard to complete it within the stipulated time of one hour. It was a gruelling and tough task.

The cross-country should have proved an unpopular item but it was not so. On the contrary we loved it. There were quite a few short-cuts and diversions, which one could opt for. Seldom any teacher accompanied us in the run and so the scope of discretion was ample.

These diversions had their special charms too. If you ran down straight from the High Point, giving a bye to the Dairy Farm, you would reach the valley between the School-ridge and the village. It is a lush green patch where the village traders left their hobbled ponies to graze. One could untie a pony and use the rope as a halter around its neck and enjoy a ride. The ponies were docile and obliging. We often took to this track. Most of the time there were three to four ponies in this grassy patch. We raced them point to point yelling and hollering like Red Indians. At times one would have a tumble but it added to the fun. On *bazaar* days there were no ponies. Traders would pack their wares on their backs and go to the bazaar locations. On these days buffaloes replaced the ponies as our racing mounts. Abhaya Nandan Rai distinguished himself as a champion jockey on both types of mounts. We had a merry time.

There were some old and tall mulberry trees also on this route.

In season these trees were full of fruits. Two trees within the Malaria Control Station's compound deserve special mention. They were of an improved variety. The fruits resembled large caterpillars and were lush with sweet juice. One could have a wonderful repast. It became our favourite halting and re-fuelling station till the fruits lasted.

This location, however, had a disadvantage. It was visible from the road running on the top of the school ridge. Our game dress consisted of bright orange or green T-shirts and Khaki shorts. A keen observer could notice our movements from this vantage point. Unfortunately for us, Sri D.P. Singh made it a habit to do so. Whenever he noticed anyone leaving the track and entering the Malaria Control Station Compound, he would walk down, catch him in the act and pack him off to run the full course again.

This risk made it all the more adventuresome. A battle of wits ensued between us and Sri Singh. Once I and Matwala were up the tree, gobbling the juicy mulberries, when to our horror we saw Sri Singh approaching. I just did not know what to do and decided to give up. Matwala was made of sterner stuff. He showed great presence of mind and promptitude. He climbed higher and hid himself in the thick foliage of the tree. His green shirt and khaki shorts helped him in this camouflage action. Sri Singh ordered me to get down. I received a dressing-down and was sent on the long re-run. Sri Singh hovered round the tree looking up suspiciously but could not locate Matwala. After an hour or so of Sri Singh's departure, Matwala climbed down. In a receptacle made of mulberry leaves, he brought home almost a pound of ripe red-purple mulberries. How thoughtful of him! This act of outwitting Shri Singh made Matwala an all-time legend.

Netarhat was an all-stag affair. There were no girls around. In summer in the pack of tourists one could have a glimpse of some teenage girls. Whenever they were sighted all eyes turned right or left to pay them compliments. Teachers would smile and order 'eyes front'. However we had a score of 'heroines' in our midst. These were the boys with fine features and delicate limbs who donned the drags and did the feminine parts in dramas.

We did not have a cinema house. We only had a 16mm projector. Most of the films shown were documentaries obtained free of

cost from the Govt.'s Films Division. Sometimes sports films obtained from the British Council or U.S.I.S. were also screened. In all my six years only one Hindi feature film *Parineeta* was shown in the school. This was the old *Parineeta* directed by Bimal Roy featuring Ashok Kumar and Meena Kumari in the leading roles. The film, unlike its re-make, was true to Sharat Babu's story.

To fill the void dramatic activities were taken up in earnest. The first drama to be staged was, if I remember correctly, *Taimoor Ki Haar* in the Chalet. It was staged within three months of the opening of the school. It won acclaim from all quarters. Now, the theatre-bug bit us hard. Soon an inter-house drama competition was launched. This was also staged on the terrace of the Chalet. The audience sat in the tennis court. It was again a great success. Not only the students but all Netarhat residents turned up to see the performances.

In the beginning only those plays were selected which did not have a female character. Such plays were difficult to come by. So we had no option but to go for the dramas with one or two women's roles. It was a hard task to persuade any boy to do a woman's role. The requisite conditions were also tough. You could not pick up any boy, drape him in a saree, and put him on the stage to do the heroine's role. There were very few among us who could do justice to such roles, personality-wise as well as talent-wise.

Persuading boys who could meet the needs was an uphill task for the director. Some were great sports and accepted the challenge just for the heck of it. Some consented when their sense of loyalty to the house was invoked. Some were mulish enough to refuse outright.

Once the boy was selected, hectic activities started to kit him out properly. The tailor made fine padded blouses, petticoats and lehngas for them. Strips of Zari increased the dazzle. Matajis took great pains in the make-up. As a result our 'heroines' looked just great in their fancy attires.

To celebrate 'Buddha-Jayanti' we were once preparing to stage a three-act play on the life of Lord Buddha. I had a bit role in this drama. My friend Ram Swaroop Singh was doing the role of Yashodhara, the consort of Prince Siddhartha Gautama. We were

done up fully and were waiting for Shri Mithilesh Kanti, director of the drama, to start the full dress rehearsal. Meanwhile we found a bevy of girls trooping in. These were genuine girls. They made a beeline to Ram Swaroop and other boys in the drags. Perhaps they took our 'heroines' to be real girls and wanted to have a chat. When they got close one of them giggled and shouted, "Oh my God! they are boys!" All of them doubled up in laughter to the discomfiture of our heroines.

Shri Kanti, who had followed on their heels made the repartee, "So what! Aren't they prettier than you?"

This sobered them instantly and they beat a hasty retreat.

In one drama I also did a female role. The drama was based on the life of Rani Durgawati, the brave Gond Queen, who had defied the great Mughal Emperor Akbar and gone down fighting. I was not qualified in any way for this role but the circumstances ganged up to push me into it. Loreng had been selected for this role and he had been rehearsing for quite some time. I was the Assistant Director and prompter. On the evening of the dress rehearsal, Loreng fell sick with high fever and was admitted into the infirmary. In such a short time it was difficult for anybody to master the dialogues and gestures. As prompter and Assistant Director I had memorised the entire drama. As this play was our entry for the inter-house drama competition, its performance could not be postponed. Now everybody pressurised me to switch roles — from prompter to the leading lady. I balked at it but there was no escape. The medicine of loyalty to the house etc, which I had been administering to others, was poured down my throat this time.

Luckily, the role did not require donning the female attire. Befitting a fighting queen, I put on the churidars, the improvised armour-plates and the pugree. The drama went on smoothly till we arrived to the point where the queen rebukes Akbar's messenger harshly and declares war. I was carried away by the forceful rhetoric of the long dialogue and forgot that I was doing the role of Rani Durgawati. I became myself and delivered the dialogue with great flourish, stomping my feet and gesturing vigorously with sword which I had drawn out from the scabbard. In the rush of things I switched over from the feminine-gender verbs of the dialogue to the masculine-gender ones to which I was used to.

The audience was in splits. They clapped and laughed loudly. I thought it was an applause and put in more vigour into my acting. I had no eye for the wildly gesticulating director in the wings who was trying to tell me to pipe down.

The curtain fell. The roar of the audience was deafening. I was preparing to take curtain calls when the director brusquely pulled me aside and told me the *faux pas* that I had committed.

So, in spite of best efforts, I could become neither a hero nor a heroine.

