

## **MATAJEE, MAMAJEE AND MESS**

Three Ashrams (houses) were organised into a unit for the administrative back-up. This unit was called a set. Initially there was only one set consisting of three Ashrams - Shanti, Prem and Ashoka. Each Ashram had its own dining hall where we used to have our breakfast, lunch and dinner but the food was prepared and distributed from a common kitchen or mess. The kitchen was supervised by the senior house-mother. In the case of our mess it was our house-mother, Mrs. Tripathi, who was the mess-supervisor.

The food was wholesome and balanced. There was no bed-tea. In fact tea or coffee was never served. In its place germinated gram (chick-peas) "Subu Ka Channa", was given. It is a highly nutritious and nourishing item but to a young palate its taste was not very welcome. The more disciplined and obedient ones chewed it down faithfully but some of us preferred to raise a crop with it. The flower-beds in the rear of the Ashram were soon flush with lush-green young gram plants.

This went on unnoticed for some-time. However it could not escape the keen observation of Shri J.N. Dar. He did not appreciate our agricultural enterprise and instructed housemasters to preside over the ceremony of chewing the "Subu Ka Chana" every morning. We had no other option now but to chew and swallow the health-food.

The vegetables were supplied by a contractor. He shipped the load every evening from Ranchi. He would supply the cheapest vegetables for good reasons. One of his regular items was Karela, the bitter gourd - another health-food. These were not the tender dainty "Karela" prepared back-home but thick half-ripe ones fully justifying their name. Eating them was a torture but again there was no escape. If anybody was found leaving it he was deprived of the sweet-dish for a score of days. Sweet dish was something one looked forward to. To go without it was unthinkable hence we swallowed the bitter pill.

We pestered the house-mother to vary the menu and get us

some new dishes. She did try to comply with our requests but her choice was limited. We did not realise her limitations and blamed her squarely for feeding us the same items every day. To harass her a set of tactics were evolved. We would decide to cause shortage of one item on every other day to prove that we were not being fed properly. One day we would not touch rice at all and fill ourselves up with chapaties and “dal” only. As a result a lot of rice would go waste and the chapaties and dal would get short. To meet this development next day Mataji would get a lot more chapaties and dal made and reduce the amount of rice. We would reverse the earlier tactics and concentrate on rice and curry and leave chapaties and dal alone. Poor Mataji was on verge of tears at times. To her credit she neither uttered a harsh word to us nor did she complain to the Principal. Like a brave soldier she carried her cross.

Mostly a truce was called when Mataji served a special treat or varied the menu. She had to pressurize, cajole and threaten the contractor to get new and different vegetables. Many a time instead of supervising the cooks she herself slogged for hours in the kitchen to prepare something which would please us and make us to declare a cease-fire.

The Medical Officer had the privilege of recommending special diet for the ailing students. Full advantage was taken by us of this provision. Most of us developed toothache. It entailed special diet of extra-milk, sugar and bread. One could mix them and have a belly-full of pudding. Once a cranky Medical Officer came as the locum. He prescribed a handful of fanciful special diets. For stomach disorder he would prescribe goat’s milk and “Mangur” fish. His favourite recommendation for almost all out-door patients was milk and “Jalebi” sweets - most welcome to us all. The number of out-door patients suddenly surged forth and soon it out-numbered the strength of healthy boys. He remained at Netarhat for about a week and we had a whale of a time. To our great disappointment he did not come again. Perhaps Sri Dar put in a word with the Civil Surgeon of Ranchi.

Tea and Coffee were taboo for us. One had it on rare occasions at teachers’ residences. During the rehearsals of a drama or on its successful presentation the directing teacher gave us tea as a treat. It tasted like nectar. We yearned for more but there was hardly any

way of getting it. There was a small canteen in school campus which served tea but it catered only to tourists. It was out of bounds for us. We approached the canteen manager but he flatly refused to oblige. He doled out a long lecture on the demerits of tea and merits of self-control over palate. We were left to our own devices.

Necessity is the mother of invention. My friend Ravindra Singh "Matwala" was a boy of tremendous initiative. He was known as "Matwala" as he had mugged up the entire "Madhushala" - a book of poems by the celebrated Hindi Poet, Harivanch Rai "Bachchan" composed on the lines of "Rubaiyat Umar Khaiyyam". During one vacation he mastered the mystery of tea-making and when he returned he brought along all necessary ingredients and implements for the tea ceremony. It included a big packet of tea, sugar cubes, tins of condensed milk and an electric kettle. In the evenings we would shut the door and windows of our room, hook up the kettle's cord with the electric wire and make tea. We would sip the brew slowly to make it go a long way. We enjoyed these tea-soirees for a long time. One evening the house-master came on a prow. Perhaps he had been tipped off by some rat. He kicked open the door - there was no bolting device on the inner side, and saw our operation. We were quick to offer him a mugful of tea but he declined it sternly, berated us for a long time and seized all the implements. I hope he put it to good use. It was never returned to Matwala.

However this was not the end of the world. Wherever there is will there is a way. "Matwala" befriended the electric-lineman Tiwari, who lived in the staff quarters. He lived alone. After the games we would repair to his quarters. He would fetch us tea and snacks from the canteen. Now with the tea we could have savouries like samosa and pakoras as well. At times we got even Jalebis. This enterprise soon ate up all our tuck-money. However 'Matwala's genius found a way to solve this problem. He advised that all of us should write home to send money on Tiwari's address. To justify the demand for the extra money we wrote that during our trip to Ranchi we had borrowed money from Tiwari and it needs to be paid back. As the demanded sums were small, the money orders came promptly. The system worked wonderfully till Tiwari was transferred out. We tried to cultivate some other employees but in vain. Good Samaritans are very few in this selfish world.

Whenever Mataji went out of station - sometimes she went away for weeks, one of the office accountants was given the charge of mess. We called him Mamajee - mother's brother. This honorific, instead of pleasing him, miffed him. When you call a person "Mama" you automatically label him as your father's "Sala" - brother-in-law, the loser, as well. This is a common term of endearment among friends and of abuse for others. Hence he did not relish the epithet. However, it stuck. The more he deprecated it, the more it gained currency. Ultimately he had no way but to give up.

Being an office hand he was a stickler for rules and regulations. He would not oblige us with special dishes like Mataji. Within days of his taking charge the feud would commence. We brought him to heels quickly. He realised soon that he was pitted against veterans and gave higher priority to discretion over valour. In fact he proved more pliable than Mataji. Being an accountant he had better leverage vis-a-vis the contractor. He could prevail upon him to vary the supply. The contractor could not afford to displease the person who was to clear his bill. A small query from Mamajee could tie up his money forages. Mamajee's upper hand in the matter meant better curry for us. We looked forward to the days when Mataji would go on furlough and Mamaji would take over.

