

Roses Red and Papers Brown: Five Years at Delhi University



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Surjit was brought up in many different places in India, went from Delhi University into the Indian Foreign Service, and subsequently joined her husband in academics, shuttling between India and the United States. Now a semi-retired professor with two grown-up sons, she lives with her Himalayan cat, music, books, and walks in Bethesda, Maryland, USA.

Editor's Note: This piece was originally written for "Down Memory Lane: The Platinum Year 1922-1997", Delhi: University of Delhi" 2000 when the author was a Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The author was a Delhi University student over 1953-58 in Miranda House.

Roses. Roses. It was not roses all the way, not by a long stretch, and there was no myrtle strewn on the muddy paths. But it is roses I remember best, in serried ranks of yellow and white, pink and flame and hectic red, encircling the fountain. Where on its steps I was accustomed to pass winter afternoons, book in lap, heady with the scented air; until a sudden chill, a change of light, or a dry throat, reminded me that it was time for tea.

Back to Miranda House, to make another pretence of study. There was the well-worn walk along the *pipul* avenue – this was before vulture guano had destroyed those magnificent trees-and across the lawns outside the science buildings sniffing at the banks of flowers – hollyhock, larkspur, love-in-he-mist, antirrhinum, phlox, pansies – tall and short, blue and purple, that Monet might have painted, and on to the University Library. Hallowed space lined with musty books bound in red and gold, with brown leaves that crumbled sometimes as I turned the pages. Pillared portico, facing north, where we leaned and talked, perhaps of how Louis Mountbatten was reported to have proposed marriage to Edwina Ashley at that very spot, outside the ballroom of the then

Viceregal Lodge, on February 14, 1922. Apt chat for young and romantic undergraduates, as we were. That was before I had tried to study Mountbatten's career and concluded that his vanity, his ambition, had contributed much to great tragedy for Indians.

Back to the library! The theme song of a life spent in and out of libraries around the world. I remember when the "new" library was built for Delhi University, opposite the Arts Faculty building; the pride we took in it, the helpfulness of the even prouder librarian and his staff. I remember one whole day there spent in a non-easy chair reading a nineteenth century edition of Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, and the feelings it evoked in me. It is odd to think that this is the first time I have had occasion to mention that book since then, and the chances of discussing it with anyone today are slight indeed. But it was the open-shelf system of Delhi University library, and its reasonably well stocked stacks, that sharpened my appetite for the incomparable pleasures of random reading. I reflect a little sadly on the very limited holdings of Indian university libraries these days, and the fact that not many of my so-competent post-graduate students at Jawaharlal Nehru

University read widely for the sheer fun of it. But my sons do, and for that, as for so much else, I am grateful.

Another strange thought crosses my mind as I drive masked against Delhi's alarmingly high pollution levels today and avoid visiting the "old campus". My strongest recollection of five years spent on that campus is of beauty. Beauty with a capital B. Those cloudless skies crowded with stars bright enough to illuminate a volume of verse.... The wind blowing through the circular stairs of Flagstaff House.... The first rains turning the grey rocks and thorny acacia of the Ridge to a delicate green on which peacocks danced.... The fluted columns and marble tombs of Delhi College, then at Ajmeri Gate, while we waited anxiously for the results of some inter-collegiate debate to be declared The soft, shadowed lawns of St. Stephen's College as we carried that handsome Mukherji Memorial Trophy back to Miranda House for the umpteenth time or recounted their latest Shakespeare production.... The strains of the violin under Yehudi Menuhin's matchless fingers in the auditorium of the newly built Pusa Institute.... The call of the koel, and the sudden unfurling of a hoopoe's crest ... The first experience of grand piano playing by Claudio Arrau in the noble Sapru House, not yet ruined by neglect and petty politics.... Sunrise walks in clean sand and mustard fields along the fast-flowing Yamuna – today's sewer miscalled the Yamuna is not recognisable to me – and the hot, sweet *Dhabha* tea for afters.

There was something beautifully awesome, too, in natural terrors. One afternoon a swarm of locust descended, decimating every green thing in a matter of hours. And the recurring *loo* carried with it an intensity of something more than desert sand. I remember once being lifted by the *loo*, white cotton sari billowing like a mini-parachute, being hurtled down Probyn Road, and arriving at the Arts Faculty building for final examinations even more flurried and

frightened than when I started. It must have been about that time that I decided that the *burqa* had less to do with Islam or the subjugation of women than with climate. Who would not want to be protectively veiled from the fierce *loo*?

What about truth, you may ask, in lower or upper case? Nirad Chaudhuri had a lot to say on the subject, forefinger wagging, as he sat on his straight-backed chair in an ancient flat on Nicholson Road near Mori Gate and declaimed on the evils of our educational system and why he was tutoring his sons himself, at home. What emerged from those interminable sessions in the Coffee House, served by the ageless Verghese now no more, but a reinventing of the epistemological wheel?

Perhaps there were fewer "notables" visiting us then so that I still remember vividly Isiah Berlin's talk on the hedgehog and the fox. No camera caught me receiving a degree from the hands of the handsome Duke of Edinburgh, but I have a snapshot in my mind. Bits (not bytes!) of lectures float across time. "Do you want to cut grass or sell tobacco at Rs. 1,000 a month, or serve India for Rs. 300?" asked gentle Mr. Kapadia. Our answers were unhesitating, if varied. Some of us intuitively knew then what we have learned subsequently: education is the basis of civil society, and the acme of a liberal education is public service. Like every history student at Delhi University for decades, I was profoundly moved by Amin Sahib's dedication, by his ability to make Mughal India come alive. And I discovered recently that Bipan Chandra has long since forgiven and forgotten the juvenile antics my friends and I played at in his early classes.

But we lived under a gentle intellectual regime at Miranda House. We were expected to be "good girls" and often addressed as "daarling chieeld", but we were not prodded or pushed to excel; performance far below potential brought no

penalties before the ultimate test, at the end of three lazy years! The more efficient semester system, or even annual university examinations were not known to us. Yet there must have been something good about that coddling, and it is evident that our teachers cared for our welfare. My tutor told me much later how she had suggested to the head of the University History Department that I NOT be appointed to the position I had applied for after my Masters, because it was more fitting that I prepare for the UPSC examination and join the Indian Foreign Service; which I did, and have no regrets. More importantly, the profiles of Mirandians exhibited at the Golden Jubilee celebrations this year reveal the absolutely sterling contributions made by them towards human rights, development, literature, and the arts – those fields that distinguish a great civilisation from a fledgling entity and that demand nothing less than everything.

Student politics too, seemed to have been gentler then than now. Election campaigns were neither strident nor violent, and we were more concerned about improving the uncomfortable nitty-gritty of our daily lives than with great ideological issues at the national or international plane. I do not recall being solicited by any political party when I was (uncontested) President of the Students' Union at Miranda House, even though one favourite teacher, Roma Mitra, was an active Lohia Socialist and later stood for Parliament; (she lost).

Perhaps that benign neglect was because we were too engrossed in trying to get our Principal replaced-and succeeded in doing so-or because I was so obviously naive; but I am sure it was a “good thing” to have been non-involved in political strife as students. We took out demonstrations, of course, when one or another *zulm* (atrocious) had taken place, but without hate, without enmity; who would now remember screaming “*Salazar, hail hai!*”? We had our social service society to which we contributed some time and effort, and that

satisfied, for the moment our yearnings for social reform. As mentioned above though, many Mirandians, many alumni of Delhi University, went on to do a great deal more.

Those were good years, conducive to friendship, to love. A few of my friends married each other and their children remind me of what we must have looked like then. The close friends I made at Delhi University remain my friends, perhaps closer, even though our paths have since meandered over many different hills and valleys and can never really come back full circle. I do not know if five years at Delhi University qualified me as genuine *Dilliwalla*, probably not. But my pulse says yes, as it races each time I come back to Delhi, by road or by rail or by ‘plane and I give thanks for the privilege of having studied there during the peak years of the Nehru era.❖

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