

# State of the Reunion

*Catching up with a century-ful of 'old girls'  
can be a rejuvenating experience*

**Bachi Karkaria**



We hated having to toe the Loreto line in those unbridled days of youth. Like spirited fillies, we chafed at the bit and stamped our impatient hooves in protest, but there was no getting away from the tightly held college reins of those Irish nuns. We thought we had escaped from school uniform, but here were we in a straitjacket. If you wore a trendy mini, you risked having brown paper strips pinned to the hem to make up for the shortfall. The anticipated freedom was bunk. You couldn't; the gates were kept firmly shut till 3 pm.

Loreto College on Calcutta's Middleton Row was the holy grail for a class of girls desperate to turn overnight from babalog to babes. That it was no less of an object of hormonal desire for the boys from St Xavier's just a sigh away was not incidental to its reputation. So, naturally, we didn't take too kindly to the nuns' dog-in-the-manger moral policing. Surely their vows didn't oblige them to make a habit of it, we had ruefully joked.

But the alma mater said, 'Come back, all is forgiven. I am 100 years old, and you aren't in the libidinous bloom of youth either.' So i found myself entering its hallowed portals once again after 45 years. Much water had flowed down the Hooghly – and several newer rivers of my experience – so i simply surrendered to what Marquez called the 'the charitable deceptions of nostalgia'.

The past disciplining turned into an autumnal shade of mellow. The 'parlour', scene of clammy-palmed retribution for sins of omission and commission, no longer loomed in ominous proportions. The foyer's marble floor, the banister of the elegant staircase sweeping up to the no-man's land of the cloister seemed less highly polished and therefore less formidable.

The basketball field, accessory to my worst torments, now not merely covered at the edge of the chrysanthemum-girdled grounds, but actually seemed to beckon with an offer of redemption. Mother Joseph Michael, she of the sturdy schoolboy ankle boots beneath her white habit, had stomped off to blow her chastising whistle at the angels, and i had recovered the confidence that had so often lain bleeding into the red earth of that shaming battlefield.

Why, even the 'sacred lawn' with the grotto at the far end was no longer off-limits. Not only were we digging our defiant stilettos into it, the centenary organisers had pitched the celebratory dais upon it. Old restrictions die hard for i found i couldn't step on that once-forbidden grass without expecting an angry shooing off. But i noticed that its green was now greying, sparse, balding in patches. Like us.

Seeking out batch-mates, we huddled round the campfire of recollections. British Council debates with Krishna now Sen, intercollegiate drama competitions at IIT Kharagpur with Gitanjali now Aiyar, hostel bread and butter with Rita now Bhimani. Of our professors, only the former Miss Moosa had made it to the reunion. In her time, she had been overshadowed by the duo of the resplendent Miss Chatterjee, Oxford, and the reticent Miss Bapat, Cambridge, who had seduced us irrevocably with the expanse and nuance of Eng Lit.

What had been the Magnolia's canteen saddened me with its greasy Veg Chopification. Whither had fled the propah cutlets, the Thursday special of Chicken Biryani and Ice Cream for the usual set-lunch price of Rs 1.50?

Singing the 'Hymn to the Nation' at the closing ceremony, i was acutely conscious of the gap between the idealistic hope of its verses and today's niggardly fulfilment, but i still belted it out with gusto. When you embark upon a sentimental journey, reality's baggage has to be the first casualty.

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**Alec Smart said: "In a party, some are frogs and the rest are toadies."**

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