

THE SUNKEN GARDEN

***The summer in India is hot.
In Vellore it is hotter.
And July is when it is hottest.
That summer of 1965 was particularly hot for all of us***



***We were all gathered in the beautiful sunken garden. It was 1700 hrs.
All of us were the candidates who had descended into Vellore for the
interview. This was the interview to be chosen to become medical students in
this elitist medical school - The Christian Medical College, Vellore. Even as I
write this epistle, I can feel the butterflies rumbling in my tummy.***

It was a BIG deal!

***To be accepted into this institution meant that you would be the envy of every
medical student from the "inferior" medical colleges throughout the Indian
subcontinent. Its results as a medical institution were par excellence for the
whole duration of its existence.***



The candidates were not the only people in the Garden. There were the staff of the College; Parents of some of the candidates, and of course the senior medical students. The candidates had to be there. The parents were there to give moral support to their lucky children. The staff members were there as they were organizing the whole function. The seniors were there to 'suss out' the juniors.



The air was electric.

There were conversations going on with every one. Some of us “orphans” who had come alone and were not related to any staff members (mainly the non-Syrian Christians), and had no one to hold our cold and clammy hands, just stood looking blankly around.

The Sunken Garden is a beautiful place. The serene chapel is at one end and the entrance to the college on the other. It is flanked on either side by two important buildings. One houses the ladies hostel and the other is the old pharmacy and lecture hall block. The center of this area is the Sunken Garden. It has a delightful lily pond in the center. The flowers that surround this area are really a splash of bright colors enveloped in green.



BUT we as candidates waiting for our fate – we never really saw anything. We had come from all parts of the sub continent and some of us from areas further away. Cyril Mathai was from Sri Lanka even though he had a full flow of Syrian Christian blood gushing through his veins. Ronnie Gyi was from Burma or as it is called now – Myanmar. Preman Jeyaratnam was a homegrown Jaffanese boy from the tiger province of Sri Lanka. Preima Doraisamy & G Johnson were from the Island Country of Singapore (which became a Republic & Independent nation also in 1965). Mahadevi Thambayah & myself were from Malaysia. There may have been others from outside India – but these are the only ones that I recall.

All of us had taken the entrance exam in different parts of the country and also in Singapore. From the hundreds that sat for the exam we were the 120 who were selected. Just 60 boys and 60 girls were chosen. As the bible says “Many are called BUT only few are chosen”.



We came to Vellore in different modes of transport. Balaji Naidu walked from his home in the affluent part of Vellore town. Most of us came by train and landed in Katpadi Junction. As we got out of the train some scruffy looking guys who were asking us if we were the candidates approached us. We were then whisked off in the college bus to the respective hostels to be bunked in. A few of the seniors had accepted to look after the candidates. I stayed with Thillakanu. He was my schoolmate in Malaysia and he took me into his room. This was room 325 - which eventually became my room when Thilla moved up to a more spacious room. I slept on the floor and on a thin mattress during the 3 days of the interview,



The candidates were grouped according to their ages. There were 10 candidates in each group. There were 6 groups in the men's section and 6 groups in the ladies section. The youngest group in the men's section was called Group 1. Shankar Krishnamurthy was the youngest in Group 1 & he was also Number 1. The youngest group in the ladies section was called Group 7 and the youngest candidate there was Bella Mary Mathai - Number 61. From this batch of 120 candidates only 30 boys and 30 girls would eventually make it.

The next three days was medical examinations, interviews, group tasks, hat talks and every manner of probing to make sure we were good, holy and wholesome characters to be admitted into this sacred institution. I think the process failed terribly. Look at the class of '65 and the rogues that have come out of it!

(To those of you who are a bit thick – the last statement was supposed to be a joke.)

The crowd at the sunken garden slowly grew restless as they waited for the results to be announced. But as the Assistant Principal walked up to the top of the stairs at the Pharmacy block end, the crowd fell silent.

With a great sense of importance he started by saying, " The successful male candidates for entrance to the Christian Medical College for the year 1965 are as follow:

Number 1 – Shanker Krishnamurthy

Number 3- Clement Denadayal

Number 7- Jacob Korula

Number 8- Ashok Dyal Chand

Number 10- Bobby M Thomas

Etc

Etc

Number 21 – Roop Kishen

Etc

Etc

Number 41 – Cyril Mathai

Number 51- Rabindarnath Kitchner

Number 52- Abel Arumugam

Number 53- Charles Premkumar

Etc

Etc

Number 58- Preman Jeyaratnam

Number 60- Surinder Kaul"

I turned to my group mates, Charlie and Kitchie and gave them a hug. Tears were already welling in my eyes. I had somehow done the impossible. I was in the most prestigious of all the medical institutions. I can't really remember anything else that took place at that time. And I am sure most of my classmates had the same experience.

The unsuccessful candidates slowly turned around and walked that long long walk back to the men's hostel. They had to pack their things and prepare to leave. The bus was already waiting to take them to Katpadi station and to a different life.

The voice of the Assistant Principal cut through the chaos and in his self important voice continued by saying, " The successful female candidates for the entrance to the Christian Medical College for the year 1965 are as follows:

Number 61- Bella Mary Mathai

Number 63 – Usha Onden

Number 71 – Meera Narisiman

Etc

Etc

Number 82 – Joyce Thomas

Number 85 – Sushila Mary Joseph

Number 87 – Shirley Mary Joseph

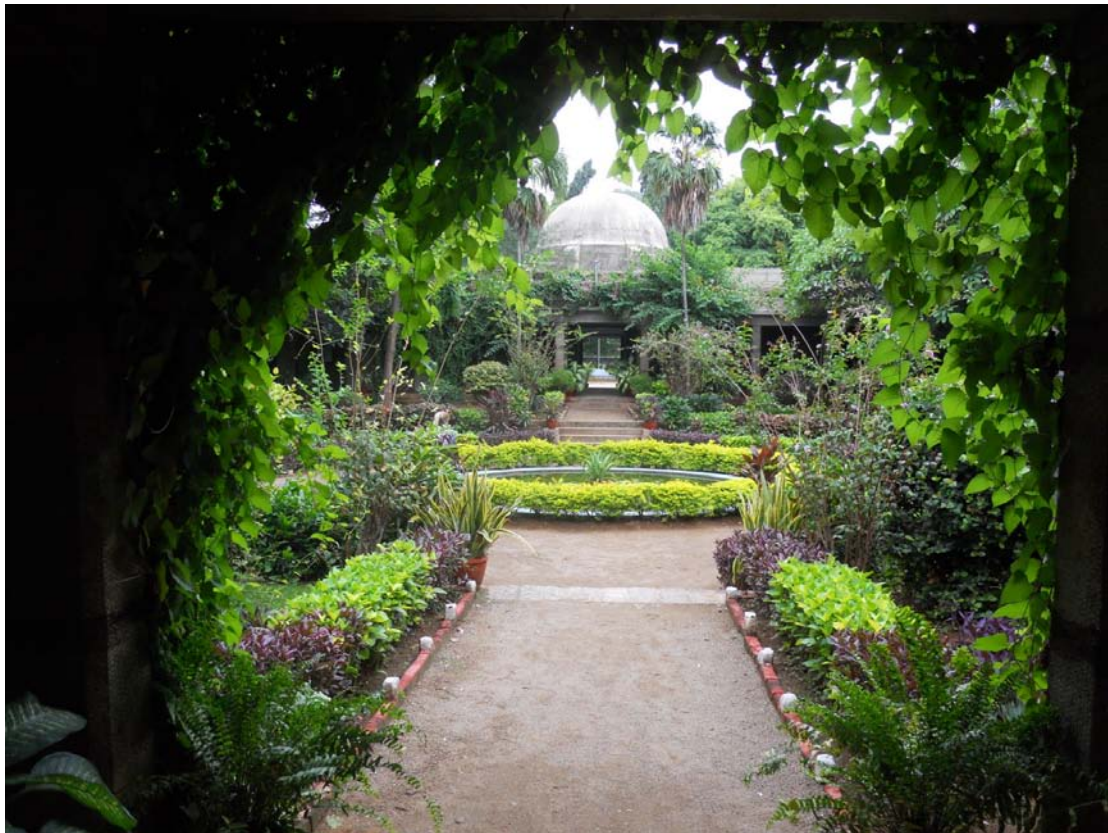
Number 89 – Alka Sinha

Etc

Etc

Number 112 – Jharna Tudu

Number 120 – Zokumi Pachu".



All the successful male students then left the Sunken Garden and walked back to the Men's Hostel. Every one of us was talking in an animated manner. As we left the college campus through the second gate, we heard this loud growl from some rough looking guys in dirty lungi's sitting on the culvert. This was the culvert at the beginning of Gault Drive that led to the Men's Hostel.

"Get the hell over here you stinking bloody junior pissers and kneel down on the ground and pay homage to your MIGHTY seniors".

That heralded the starting of the best years of my life in CMC Vellore.



And that my friends' is a story for another episode.

*Abel W K Arumugam
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