

The Early Years Of The Punjab Public School, Nabha

By Lila Kak (Ex-Junior School Teacher)

(Mr. Kate knew that children in junior school, mainly from villages of Punjab, were raw, without exposure to English or polish. So, he selectively assembled some of the best staff from all over India for them. Lila Kak was a very young daughter of an aristocratic family of J&K. When she graduated from St Bede's, Shimla, Mr. Kate invited her to teach in junior school, where with her background and sophistication, she could influence the young children. Her father promptly agreed as he had admired Mr. Kate from the days when she was a student at Sanawar, where Mr. Kate served as the Bursar before coming to PPS. Below is a piece written by her for The Eagle - Dr Jashanjot).



Lila Bhan nee Kak (Ex-Junior School Teacher, 1963-66)

So vividly can I remember arriving at P.P.S. Nabha in January 1963, escorted by my father, for my very first job ! I had recently graduated from St. Bede's College, Simla, complete with a T.T.C., ready and eager to teach. When we arrived, we were met by **Mr. J.K. Kate**, the founder headmaster of a wonderful institution, which has proved to be of prime importance in my teaching career.

I see us walking down the marble corridors of the Senior School and being ushered into his office. **Mr. Kate** met us with a warm welcome. We had actually known him for several years as I was a student at Sanawar and he, the very competent Bursar . It was because of the **Kates'** presence at Nabha, that my parents felt comfortable for me to join P.P.S. as a resident teacher at the young age of twenty!

The next stop was the Junior School located less than half a mile away.

As we drove through the high, black, wrought iron gates, a very magnificent building stood impressively in front of us with beautifully manicured lawns and beds of colourful flowers. It had been the Viceregal Lodge, we were told, in the days when Nabha was a State. I can vouch for the grandeur of the building with its ornate chandelier in the foyer where, as we entered, a venerable Sikh *chaprasi* met us. It was **Balbir Singh**, known to generations of Nabhaites as **Balbirji**. I soon discovered what an integral part of the set up he was- Helpful, paternal and useful in more ways than one. One could say he was almost indispensable! He always kept a hawk's eye on the boys, but his most prominent task was the tying of turbans for the new little fifth and sixth graders until they learnt how to manage on their own.



Balbir Singh helping Mrs Nirmla Kate and Mr GS Punia at Farewell Party for Mr JK Kate(1972)

The next person we met was a very unusual and special person who was to be my professional mentor for life. In her spotless, white sari, **Miss Malkani**, the Head of the Junior School blended in with the marble floors and white walls of the building. That was how she was - shy at first, always keeping herself in the background, yet she produced and commanded a high standard of excellence by her sheer example. Her greatest compliment, she once told me, was when a parent reported to her that his son had said to him, “*Miss Malkani hame wahi sikhati hain, jo khud karti hain*”. (**Miss Malkani** does exactly what she teaches us to do.) In short she always practiced what she preached and no one could ever argue with her or fault her for having separate standards for herself! She had large eyes, an aquiline nose and a smile that lit up her somewhat grave face.

I soon found myself in **Beas House** as the Housemistress of twenty-five boys. It was a very family like atmosphere and I have fond memories of all the boys I interacted with between Jan 1963 and May 1966, when I left.

The British Council was well represented at P.P.S. and we all learnt a lot about modern techniques and attitudes to teaching / learning. We were very fortunate to have **Mr. Michael Vodden** from the Council as a guide in the latest methods of pedagogy. The atmosphere was very child centered and the children and teachers interacted with each other closely, thereby building bonds of trust which enabled the boys to clarify doubts if they had any, and ask questions whenever in doubt. It was remarkable to have such a place to work in the India of the 1960's. **Mr. Vodden's** whole family was part of the **P.P.S. family** . His wife Vera was the epitome of hospitality. Their three sons spent only their holidays in Nabha as they were studying in a boarding school in England, but their twin daughters Emma and Sarah were favorites with the Junior school students and were an asset to their spoken English skills! **Mr. Vodden** was followed by **Mr Mallon** and family whom I knew just for six months, but who also had a fruitful association with the school. The results of our boys spoke for the success of **Mr. Vodden's and Mr.**

Mallon's hard work and effort and the speed with which many non speakers of English picked up a foreign language was phenomenal.

The picture below is of the staff that laid strong foundations of The PPS. Miss Kak is second from right in the first row standing. It shows Mr Vodden, Mr Dick Pine(peace Corps), Roger Burrige (VSO), Mr and Mrs Tandon and of course Miss Kak's mentor Mis GB Malkani apart from others.



Sitting L to R: Mr. PN Mathu (Geography), Mr. DK Dighe (Maths), Mr. YP Bhardwaj (History), Miss KP Pannu, Mr. HD Vodden, Dr. Surjit Singh (Senior Master), Mr. JK Kate (Headmaster), Mr. SC Cowell (English), Miss GB Malkani, Mr. GS Punia (Bursar), Mr. MN Tankha (Geography), Mr. OP Bhatnagar (Hindi), Dr. Ram Kishore (Medical Officer)

Standing 1st Row: Mr. D Pine (Peace Corps-USA), Mrs. W McMullen (Nurse), Miss J Lamba (Punjabi), Mr. SG Khan (Craft), Mr. MR Sharma (Maths), Mr. KC Tandon (Music), Mr. R Sibal (English), Mrs. J Singh (Matron), Mr. OP Sharma (Hindi), Mr. Satya Pal (Hindi), Mr. IB Kakar (Physics), Mrs. SK Sidhu (Matron), Miss L Kak (English), Mr. R Burrige (from UK)

Standing 2nd Row: Mr. MS Bhatnagar (Biology), Mr. Ishwar Singh (Steward), Mr. H Kumar (PT Instructor), Mr. Harbans Singh (Accountant), Mr. KK Jha (Office Assistant), Mr. SK Jain (Office Superintendent), Mr. Jagdish Singh (Librarian), Mr. OP Nagar (Estate Officer), Mr. Pushp Raj (Steno), Mr. KM Saxena (Chemistry)

We had some wonderful young people who came as volunteers from the **U.K. (V.S.O.)** and the **U.S. (Peace Corps)**. Very close friendships were formed and I am still in touch with almost all of them . **Mr. Kate** arranged that they each came to spend their summer holidays in Kashmir with my family and me, thus deepening our bonds.

During those years India went briefly to war against Pakistan. All the residential faculty were on a rotating night duty. I remember the excitement when there was an air raid warning. The sleepy children would be dragged out of bed and hustled outside. By the time the siren went off again to announce the end of the air raid warning, many wild stories of paratroopers landing in the nearby sugarcane fields and all sorts of tall tales had been concocted. Mercifully we had no untoward incidents and a special camaraderie developed between all of us in the dead of night with the chirping of frogs in the background, as we scanned the sky for swooping fighter jets! The faithful **Balbirji** would also invariably join us as the boys huddled together! **Inder Singh** was another mainstay of the Junior School, but he was never on night duty!

It was during those first years that a wonderful new swimming pool was built. We were fortunate to have **Mr. Dick Pine** as the Peace Corps volunteer for two years at that very time. He was a trained Life Guard and a great coach teaching the boys several strokes and at least the simple crawl, to every child.

Hitherto we used to go to the canal at the end of the road as a great treat, for a quick dip. Now we had a full-size pool! I must add that the walk to the canal was beautiful. The surroundings were rural and picturesque and the fertile countryside of the Punjab enveloped us on all sides. I vividly remember the walks I would take the boys on; wandering on sandy hillocks of peanuts, walking through tall fields of sugar cane and gazing at endless fields of yellow mustard plants, that ended only at the horizon. Friendly farmers always offered us a taste of the various edible crops and in the late spring the special treat was, delicious freshly made “gur “ (molasses). As we ambled along, playing spelling or geography games, there was always excitement when the hanging nests of the tailor bird were spotted in the *kikar* trees lining the dusty road, or at the thrill of getting a ride on the back of a bullock cart. Indelible memories for us all!

Another memorable project started by **Roger Miall (The first VSO, 1962-63)** was the chicken coop built under a huge spreading mango tree near **Miss Malkani's** flat. The hens provided not only excellent eggs for breakfast, but also marvelous on-the-spot Science lessons. Sometimes **Mr. K. C. Tandon**, the talented music teacher would have singing classes under the tree reminding him no doubt of *Shanti Niketan* from where he had graduated! **Mr. Tandon** married **Miss Pannu**, another very dedicated faculty member, while I was there and together they contributed a lot to the school over the several decades they worked there. **Mrs. Tandon** eventually became the Head of the Junior School. She in fact, was one of the very first teachers when the school actually opened its doors to students in 1960.



Mrs KP Tandon with younger daughter Puneeta and Mr JK Kate at his farewell party.

The Junior School had a wonderful set of teachers. There are endless, very positive, memories I have of **P.P.S.** in its pioneer days. It provided an excellent all-round education with its school trips and hikes to places of importance and interest all over India. The values imbibed were outstanding- a blend of Indian traditions coupled with the best of the West thanks to the wonderful representatives we had from the U.K. and U.S. I am sure the world was one large family in the eyes of our students, which is a superb outlook to grow up with.



A picture of the School 'Ladies Club'. It includes lady teachers and male teacher's wives. Sitting second from right is Madam Lila Kak, on her left is Mrs KP Tandon, on her right is Ms Jabir Lamba(Punjabi). Standing in the centre ar Mrs Tankha on left and Mrs Ver Vodden on the right They are flanked by Miss Malkani on the left and Mrs Punia on the right. Mrs Kate is fourth from left.

Personally, I am indebted to P.P.S. for laying a sound foundation as a teacher in me and for marvelous friendships which I will always cherish. As I end these thoughts, strains of the boys singing the school song ring in my ears and the school motto, **“ Onward and Upward”**, is my sincere wish for the school!



The picture shows David Goldberg (Peace Corps), Ms Lila Kak and Neil Hutchinson(VSO,UK). Mr YP Bhardwaj looking at them in the background.

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