

ROMANCING GURUTALAWA

S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa is a product of World War II which although it wreaked havoc and destruction in its wake, also gave birth to the school in the valley.

With the Japanese bringing the war theatre to our doorstep in Colombo, the State Council decided in February 1942 to close all schools in the Colombo District. Although numbers had fallen off a little, there were still over 700 boys at STC, Mount Lavinia and as the Warden explored possibilities of opening branches inland, Mr. and Mrs. Leslie de Seram made the generous offer of their 45 acre farm at Gurutalawa.

Whilst some of the boys were accommodated at Kingswood, Kandy, S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa began in 1942 with 55 boarders and 2 day boys.

The system would ensure that those desirous of joining STC Mount which had been relocated in their original habitat in 1946 after war hostilities had abated would be accommodated. Some of the boys who moved from the shallow end to the deep have been Ronnie and Bradman Weerakoon, Sarath Muttetuwegama and the brothers Arasakumar, Shanthikumar and Duleepkumar Philips.

Reflecting in tranquility, it is not profane to think that Guru Thalawa would mean an anticipatory Valley of Teachers and that S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa fulfilled the oracle and also gave a sense of well being to the peasantry and spread splendour in the valley.

Nestled in the hill ranges of Boralanda with orchards redolent of fruit, Gurutalawa was a tiny hamlet tucked away in a salubrious climate with a sprinkling of peasants in 1942 when the school brought lustre to the region. I had travelled many a mile on this stretch in both directions but had been too engrossed in marvelling at the ashen upright trees to have observed the school and it surely must have been a matter of missing the wood for the trees.

Today, S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa is a fully fledged school catering to extra-curricular activities with a swimming pool and has facilities for nearly all sports including athletics, cricket, rugby, basket ball, squash, volleyball, soccer, hockey, table tennis, badminton, swimming as well as activities like scouting horse riding, hiking and trekking.

There is also the encouragement for a variety of societies and clubs, debating, oratory, oriental dancing and music. S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa also has the important component of an Old Boy as headmaster who declares that,

“S. Thomas College at Gurutalawa is a Government Approved, Fee Levying, Private Boarding School within the Diocese of Colombo of the Church of Ceylon, following the National Programme of Education leading up to the GCE (O) Level Examination with teaching in all three media.”

Although rooted in the school founded by Bishop James Chapman at Mutwal in 1851 (at Mount Lavinia since 1918) S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa has had from 1942, its own

distinct ethos and unique philosophy of education that promote an uncommon lifestyle and a number of activities designed to provide a holistic and all-round education.

Governed by a Board of Governors chaired by the Bishop of Colombo, the school is headed by an Anglican Priest-Headmaster supported by a dedicated staff who provide care and teaching to the children. A chaplaincy team ensures pastoral care while house and dormitory masters ensure discipline and good order in the hostel.

In keeping with the Thomian ethos children from all parts of the country are welcome without distinction of ethnicity, class, caste or creed. S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa also offers facilities for girls.

The boarding is the backbone of the school and offers hostel facilities that are very basic but clean, safe and comfortable. The students themselves are responsible for the cleanliness of their residential facilities as part of their education and formation in self reliance and responsible independence. The distance from all major cities helps ensure that the students are not sidetracked by the many distractions and negative influences often faced by children in city schools.

A sense of the spiritual is inculcated in all students through daily religious devotions. All Christians attend daily morning prayers and night prayers in the Chapel and the Holy Eucharist on Sundays. Bible study classes are held every Sunday evening for those who would like to attend. This emphasis on spiritual formation is an integral part of the education S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa has sought to offer from its inception.

In addition to daily school classes, individual or group private tuition facilities are offered on campus for children who really need such extra help rather than as a response to the prevailing tuition culture. A lop-sided education is not encouraged and there is an emphasis on the right balance between studies and extra-curricular activities.

The unique ethos of the School is supplemented by a beautiful, lush, green 45 acre campus close to Nuwara Eliya, Bandarawela, Ohiya, Horton, Plains and Haputale.

Sharm de Alwis

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