

GO, THORA, GO; THOMIANS BECOME ASIAN SCHOOLS ROWING CHAMPIONS

by S.Muthiah

Go, Thora, Go, the girls from Colombo shouted, and responding to the shouts from their sister school, Bishop's College, the boys from St. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia, a suburb just south of Colombo, came up with an all-out effort to row away with the honours just as the shouting girls had done at the recent Asian Schools' Rowing Championships held near Muttukkadu.

Intrigued local journalists were keen to find out what Thora' meant, but Thomian parents were as dodgy about the meaning as Balu Alaganan, former Ranji Trophy captain of Madras and an Old Thomian, was, when I asked him about it, after congratulating him on Thomians moving beyond cricket and swimming, and tasting success in a new sport rowing.

Old Royalist as I am like Gopi of the Madras Players after a stint at its sister school, Ladies' College, though there was a spell at St. Thomas' Prep in between that influenced me considerably throughout my life, I have my own explanation. St. Thomas' is primarily a boarding school and, being right by the beach, boarders would have more than their fair share of Thora, seer fish in Sinhalese (a mackerel we call vanjara), and students from Royal College, landlubbers in the heart of the city, had a ball with the fishy term. But Thomians such as Ravi Menon, District Grand Master of the Freemasons, or my brother, S. Nagarajan, well-known in the heavy vehicle industry, might not have felt the full brunt of the Royalist angle to Thora, as they went to St. Thomas' branch in Gurutalawa in the hills.

Two things you might have gathered from this is that the Royal-St. Thomas' rivalry was akin to the Eton-Harrow one and something lacking in Indian school circles and that there

was a time when several students from India studied in Ceylon schools. To take the latter point first, indeed they did.

Many from the P.T. Rajan family and from the Madurai area studied at Trinity College, Kandy (schools were called colleges in Ceylon), many from the Tuticorin area studied at St. Benedict's in North Colombo, and several Chettiars, such as my father, studied at Ananda College, founded by Col. H.S. Olcott and the Buddhist Theosophical Society as the first Buddhist public school (in the British sense). And, as befitting a British public schools ethos, long inter-school rivalries were a tradition.

No matter what other schools you played against, the Big Match in every sport was against a traditional rival Royal versus St. Thomas'; Ladies versus Bishop's; St. Joseph's versus St. Peter's; Ananda versus Nalanda in Colombo; Trinity versus St. Anthony's in Kandy (but Trinity versus Royal in rugby football); Richmond versus Mahinda in Galle; etc. During the Big (cricket) Matches the students of the rival schools would take over the whole town, and crowd the playing ground with not only numbers but drown it in song and dance.

To this day, the annual Royal-Thomian match draws a bigger and more boisterous crowd than a T20 international featuring Sri Lanka. And I'm sure that, as in my day, that crowd takes time off ever so often during the match to take over the roads of Colombo, and barge into the girls' schools to serenade the awaiting young misses with 'You Are My Sunshine'.

For the record, the Royal-Thomian cricket match is the second oldest schools cricket contest in the world, the first game in the series having been played in 1879. The matches were two-day ones initially, but three-day ones starting with the Centenary match to which thousands of Old Thomians and Old Royalists came from all over the world to scream the Blue, Black and Blue Forever or The Blue and Gold Forever respectively. This rivalry is only one year younger than the one between St. Peter's College and Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. The Chappell brothers played for Prince Alfred, which

appears to have had a greater sporting record than that of the more scholarly and older St. Peter's.

I've often wondered why schools in India, even the public schools, have never been able to generate such passion over a match against a rival school. Does anyone have an answer? I'll also be glad to hear from all those who went to school in Ceylon in pre-Independence days, and have never forgotten the experience.

COURTESY:THE HINDU