

## **Annual Alumni Reunion 2010**

**“Life can only be understood backwards”**

**Reflections after the batch of 1985’s mini-reunion on November 2009**

Nostalgia smells like a warm Delhi winter afternoon to me: it is faintly dusty with traces of smoke, there is a crisp coolness with the scent of Eucalyptus or Mulberry leaves in the air, and crunchy red sand beneath my feet. Perhaps because I did not visit Delhi for several years after moving to the U.S. (my parents migrated to Chennai, so Delhi is no longer my Indian “home”), the city acquired a soft romantic glow. I became that boring old bag whose sentences started with “when I was in Delhi as a child...” Now that I have a child and must untangle the complicated U.S. system of private, public, charter and magnet schools in the Los Angeles Unified district, I talk about the days “when I was in Delhi as a schoolgirl.”

There was clarity in those days. I was at Mother’s International School from Nursery to Grade XII, and there was no question of going anywhere else. I belonged there. I knew all the back alleys, the maze of classrooms, the teachers, the recitations, the girls toilets tucked away in odd corners, the assembly hall songs, the taste of dalia porridge and brown bread served to me as a preschooler, and the bread pakoras served to me as a teenager. And I was sure that those alleys, classrooms, teachers, recitations, toilets, songs, dalia and pakoras knew me as intimately. With all the hubris of a girl whose strong feelings of identification with her school bled into a sense of ownership, it never ceased to shock me that MIS continued to exist after my graduation. School was my reality, ergo I should have been its universe, or where’s the reciprocity in that relationship? Who were these upstart students who were as comfortable in the school space as I had once been, inching me out and establishing themselves in the increasingly numerous new buildings that I scarcely recognized?

I had a charmed existence in those days, you understand, or I would not have had to wait till I was eighteen to have my first genuine encounter with feeling superfluous, redundant, and no longer at the center of things. I hold my parents and teachers entirely responsible for making those years so much fun. You want to sing? Sure, go for it! You want to dance? Sure, take part in the ballet! School was an exciting time, and all the adults in my life were encouraging. Back when it used to rain buckets in July in Delhi, I remember wearing gumboots and sloshing down the road on the first day of the new academic year thinking, I wonder what new books we’ll read, what new teachers we’ll meet, if we’ll have any new admissions! I remember the bright chattering with my friends. Summer vacations were much awaited, but the second day of vacation saw me whining to my mum, “Amma, I’m bored.”

It wasn’t until I got a 9 to 5 job at an ad agency that the world suddenly shrank and became ordinary. I couldn’t believe the lack-luster drill of the every day, the absence of an ebbing and peaking of excitement around various calendar events that filled the school and college years. I was amazed at how little most people thought beyond their jobs, beyond the immediate assignments on their desk, beyond their personal lives, and how

little they read. In school and college, my friends' ambitions were open-ended and their imaginations held the possibility of soaring. Suddenly, I found too many of my colleagues a little too settled, a little too square. Surely, there had to be more to life than this dull cycle!

Let me not take you through the meandering path by which I found something more hospitable to my temperament, except in the swiftest possible way. First, I had to figure out what kind of person I was, and what made me happy. Not all of it was a pleasant discovery. So here I was realizing that I am someone who is easily bored, needs attention and thrills, needs good conversation, needs a point to things beyond the immediate routine, and someone who is eternally suspicious of anything that comes to her too easily. Who wants to be an attention-hungry, emotionally unsettled, intellectually dissatisfied, job-hopping woman? Second, I had to find (or create) a career and personal life that worked for someone like me. The fact that I eventually got these things is a miracle, given how hard I made it for any job or man to pass my severe screening tests.

How did I get to internalize this self-confidence that if I kept holding out for what was right for me, I'd eventually get to what I wanted? I got some answers to that question when I attended the wonderfully warm reunion arranged by my batch-mates Parth Sharma and Viresh Goel in November 2009, in advance of our gala reunion to be held on January 26th, 2010. I couldn't be present for the latter, but thanks to various social networking sites, a slow trickle of emails from school friends lost to the fog of time culminated in my sudden awareness of a lively alumni network at MIS. Some of these people organized a drinks-and-lunch meet at Delhi's Panchsheel Club, when I happened to be in the city after the gap of ten years. Here were people I hadn't seen in 25 years! Many of them I hadn't known well even while we were in school. The divisions and subdivisions of school-life, which followed the protocols (at least in my days) of boys versus girls, of the arty versus techy ones, of the brainy versus jock ones, had all come in the way of our getting to know each other. There was also the added poundage and weathering of age to account for, which made some folks hard to recognize immediately. Despite all this, what I was left with is the tremendous bond between us, an odd assortment of people, each very different in our lives and in our life choices. It was a group of people who would never have met by chance, as our social and professional circles have little overlap. And yet we shared a bond made somehow stronger with the passage of 25 years of complete silence.

What made it so? There are of course the common memories. We all know the assembly-hall songs, the teachers, the classes and classrooms. But above that, we share those years experientially. We know how it felt to sit cross-legged in the morning on a prickly choir dhurry, we know the palpitations before exams, the sun streaming down on us as we ran around the maidaan, the first blush of an infatuation or first hurt at an argument with a friend. Then there is life itself. We have all had to get comfortable in our own skins, as we've made our lives outside the structures, hierarchies, and good and bad grades of school. The 25 years have been a great leveler, and we all feel some pride at each one of us having made it. There is also the shared will to bring us back together as a family, despite our dispersal across the globe. I'll admit I'm a weak link in that chain,

and not the best person when it comes to keeping in touch. But the thoughtfulness, initiative and generosity of some of my classmates in maintaining the network has been amazing.

There is also the wonder at having known anyone for so long. Suddenly aging is not something that happens gradually, but in a rush of 25 years. In talking to Sanjeev Maheshwari, we realized we knew each other in first grade. I have known my dear friend Simi since nursery school, and have vivid memories of sticking colored paper on a sheet and laying it out in the sun to dry with her. That's my life in time-lapse photography. We had no imagination back then of what we would be like now. It's not possible to look back with anything but wonderment, at each one of us finding our niche in the world. Our generation was the first to ride the wave of India's liberalization, and we had more choices than the generation before ours. I hope this is as true of all the women of my batch as it is of the men. Mother's International School gave us all a strong courage of our convictions, to make the best of the choices and vagaries the world posed to us, and the demands we confronted the world with. I am now an educator myself, and I know that if every child of every class, nation, race and religion inherits this same right to education and the same right to have a faith in herself and in her fellow beings, the same will for amity, we would live in a more tolerant, compassionate, secure and flourishing world.

Thank you Mrs. Indu Pillai, Mr. Shekhar, Ms. Anima Chandra, Mrs. Mukherjee, Mrs. Nigam, Mrs. Revathy Roy, Ms. Kamal Seth, Mr. Parashar (known to us as "IC-sir" or "Indian Culture-sir" for his wonderful stories) and countless other teachers. Thanks to all of you who made us feel that we were, with all our flaws and idiosyncrasies, capable of finding our own registers of peace and avenues of action.

**Priya Jaikumar**  
**Batch of 1985**