

Chandigarh Footlights

BY MANOHAR SINGH GILL

AT Cambridge University, achieving high academic results is not the main purpose of life. The students are there to savour the unique intellectual and social atmosphere of the place and to endeavour to develop their talents and faculties to the fullest extent possible. Some want to be artists, others writers and yet others Shakespearian actors. Each one gives to his chosen interest all his energies.

If in his three years a man can learn something worthwhile about the field of his interest, or achieve a "blue" in something like cricket or rowing, he considers his time well spent. Of course, if along the way he picks up a respectable degree, that is a bonus.

The university is, therefore, well organised to cater to all talents. There are societies for every conceivable activity from poetry writing, painting and hiking to beer drinking and the climbing of church and college steeples. When Bertrand Russell and Keynes were at Cambridge they ran a secret blue stocking society, called the Apostles. I have known Cambridge dons who, at the dead of night, will sneak out of their college rooms to climb things like the twin towers of King's College chapel.

When term opens all the societies put up little stalls and invite freshmen to join. Soon the university is humming with activity. Every evening in every college one or the other society is meeting. Cyclostyled poetry magazines appear by the dozen and little groups get down to organising drama and musical performances. But the most concentrated effort is reserved for May week at the end of the academic year when, with the exams behind them, the students give themselves up to a week of fun and laughter. May balls are held in every college and dancing goes on into the early hours when the more adventurous spirits punt to Grantchester for an early morning breakfast under the cherry trees in Rupert Brookes' garden.

But the highlights of the May Week are the many excellent productions of Shakespeare and other major dramatic works. In the summer evening, to see a drama in a Cambridge college is an experience. The quality of acting has to be seen to be believed but it can be judged from the fact that the Richard Burtons, Trevor Nunn and David Frosts of the English entertainment world are all products of Cambridge and Oxford drama societies.

A society which holds a special position in Cambridge is the Footlights. They organise an annual variety entertainment full of typical British humour. The show is put on in the Cambridge Arts Theatre for about

three nights. Such is their reputation that all London comes to see them and seats are booked months in advance. One reason why busy London-based impresarios take the trouble to come down to Cambridge is to pick new talent for the stage and even films. Such is the standard that they are rarely disappointed.

All this I have seen and remember with wistful pleasure. But I was agreeably surprised some days ago to find that Chandigarh too has its Footlights, which are in no way less than those of Cambridge. I happened by chance to see a small rehearsal of Heer-Ranjha, done by the Punjab University students, and promptly invited myself to their regular show a few days later. It was an experience and an education. Stuck in the Secretariat and dealing with files rather than faces, I have been out of touch with the young world for many years. I could only think back to the variety shows of my college days in Government College, Ludhiana. But what I saw in the university made me realise how out of date I was.

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The Law Faculty auditorium is an exciting building with a concrete shell-dome. There was the usual crowd of boys outside, wanting to get in. But they were peaceful and orderly, though in a country with so little in the way of entertainment one could understand their anxiety for admittance. Inside the hall was packed. The crowd was cheerful and well behaved. The interesting thing was that, unlike our days, the whole show was organised and controlled by the students.

With my experienced eye I could soon spot the "big boys" of the university, sauntering about as if they owned the place. But they were doing so to keep the peace rather than to break it. Except for the Dean of Students Welfare, there was no one from the establishment present. The boys and girls were all on their own and apparently liking it.

The show was something worth going miles to see. The singing by a number of girls and boys was superb. The Heer-Ranjha was gracefully done and seen with rapt attention.

In view of the nature of the story, the boy and the girl had to hold each other and put on amorous poses. What interested me was the change in the attitude of the young audience. In my days, even if a girl came on to the stage to sing a staid bhajan the boys went into a frenzy of cheering and jeering. But this young audience took it all in their stride and behaved extremely well.

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In this respect, the bhangra performed at the end was even more exuberant. It was done by boys and girls together and they really displayed a zest and vigour which had to be seen to be believed. It could have been any European folk dancing troupe. The energy and joy de vivre with which they performed the dance gave me hope that at least in Punjab the stale mores of the past might one day be swept away. Everything was artistically done and yet done without unnecessary inhibitions and the audience understood and appreciated all this. This was something we had not known or understood.

The compere had such a vast fund of funny stories to tell on the Punjabis that he kept us in stitches of laughter. Incidentally, it is only the Punjabis who love to laugh at themselves, a no mean achievement and a sure sign of sound mental health. There were cracks in plenty at the Government and its ways. In my kind of work there is little occasion for laughter. One sees so much of the seamy side of things that on most days the evening brings a profound sense of sadness. It was a joy therefore, to be carried along for a while on waves of full-bellied laughter.

There was the inevitable short play of a few scenes. The theme was the all too well known one, of the educated unemployed knocking at the city walls. The bitter-sweet dialogues though a trifle melodramatic, were, alas, all too true and left me with a sense of the total inadequacy of our efforts to give work to our young people.

I could have sat all night watching that show, but it came to an end with the rhythmic beat of bhangra drums, leaving a desire for more. It had been a small education for me. We live in a world where the young are presumed to be irresponsible and badly behaved. Unfortunately, in our country wisdom is thought to go with age. It can almost be quantified in terms of years. The older the individual the wiser he is. But here were young people who had organised and controlled a beautiful show by themselves, and displayed a variety of talents.

If India had an entertainment industry like that of the West, I have no doubt that many of them would have been picked up for bigger roles. The sad fact is that there is nothing wrong with our young people; only the opportunities are lacking.