

The spirit that is Sanawar

By Amrita Varma

1857. This was the year of the Sepoy mutiny which spread from Meerut in the heartland of India and gained momentum. Though unsuccessful, this was the first collective uprising of its kind against the British East India Company. The sparks had been lit to an otherwise peaceful rule of the Imperial Crown. Ten years before the first signs of conflict between the Raj and the locals had been seen. With a volatile political climate and in such tumultuous times the Raj and its officers found their families in grave danger and Sir Henry Lawrence came up with a very sound strategic idea of a military school and asylum for the children and orphans of the British soldiers up in the hills of the sleepy Himalayas. 1847 became the year of the evolution of education system with the setting up of The Lawrence Military Asylum now, The Lawrence School, Sanawar, one of the oldest co- educational boarding school in the world.

This school has mapped the birth of a nation and the evolution of Modern India contributing whole heartedly to its ethos and polity. It has been more often than not, forward thinking in its heritage and traditions and produced men and women of mettle in many a field and has been constantly producing brave men who tested their character on the battle field of life and at war weather in WW II where more than 200 Sanawarians had joined the forces or the wars that created India including the 1971 war where the Param Vir Chakra recipient Second Lieutenant Arun Khetrapal , a young boy of barely 21 years, was seminal in winning the war in the battle of Basantar that created history because he stuck to the values the school and its traditions inculcated in him. This is just one story out of many which one finds as one opens the history of the lives of the men and women who passed out from this institution. No wonder then, that Rudyard Kipling in his experiences of the school mentioned, 'Send him to Sanawar and make a man of him!'

Did Sanawar being a co educational boarding school, the only one of its kind in this part of the world at the time, have anything to do with building this perspective. Were women from this institution of any consequence to the world as able contributors? We can very safely say yes. Even now when there is talk of women of character and mettle in boarding schools in India Sanawar has been counted as foremost among the lot. Why so?

For this one has to go back to the training and life Sanawar gave. Just like the boys, the girls were expected to pull their weight and were not treated like fairy feathers that would fly away. The same schedules followed for both boys and girls. As children we ran the runs straining to the very end, went through the vigour of all subject classes and tests together, played all sports, took part in creative and social activities as a mixed bunch and went through drills in the bat of an eyelid with no squirm or a crease on our foreheads. Time and discipline was important. So was physical and mental activity. Standing up for oneself and the other was also vital. The day activities were together and one never felt different from being one of the boys. Only sports were played separately and then too when championships or finals took place we ran and played together. Classes were mixed and we made lifelong friendships with the boys which last to date. We knew we were one as humans and there was no disparity between men and women. We could choose any sport, debate anything, choose any

profession and question and understand the world and people around us for who they were. Experiences in school showed us that truth. There was no inhibition. No vanity. The growth of women in Sanawar was in that sense natural, not skewed like one sees in most places and was healthy. We knew how to deal with the world even before the world hit us. And we knew how to do it well not backing out but putting up a good fight with grace and integrity. We had done it in school in a microcosm. The world was just a macrocosm of the same scene.

All those who have had the privilege of being part of its legacy have made its motto a part of their lives and have survived through hell and high water with their heads held high and a spirit which is unbeatable to this day. There have been men and women in the government, in military service, in the media, as sportsmen, actors, artists, businessmen [name a field and there are many who stand on its bastions of influence and power] with impeccable credentials who run this country and the world today passing out from its corridors many years ago with the school in their hearts and minds as they live their lives at a very young age comparatively. But how is it possible that this little hill in the Himalayas could create such remarkable men and women out of children barely an age to know the ways of the world?

Slipping back to a flashback to 1857 one would imagine a wiry dirt road with a steep incline up a hill in the mountains which had wild animals on the prowl and trees and shrubbery which make habitation impossible while this cart would be pulling along a handful of brave boys and girls, frightened of the unknown inside and putting up a brave face and a few unfamiliar adults up the hill having refueled at the barely existent village of a few huts of Sanawar with a population of a few dozen people. The children of various ages from as young as 8 would have left all that they knew behind including their parents, not knowing if they would meet again, to a fate which only the creation of this institution would meet out to them that they themselves had to create by living within it.

They would have meager rations, a few tents, some medical aid and land on arrival to their destination. All they knew was they had to make the best out of what they got and that was the start of a long and adventurous journey of an institution unparalleled for its building of values by creating an ecosystem and a way of life based on building character whatever the situation, whatever the circumstance. That is where the motto of the school 'Never Give in' a trait inherited by all who lived in this institution. That journey still continues to this day within every Sanawarian's heart and in the very ethos of the school and its environs to this day.

More than 170 years in its rich history, it has always had a rich military tradition, respect for humanity, an ability to look beyond sectarianism and the ability to stand on the grounds of the brilliance of the human spirit tested in school itself on the ground, in the sports fields, in the classroom or the Hodson run with a disciplined and all rounded grooming that each Sanawarian imbibes in their lives till the day they too pass away and become a page in its chronicles of having lived full and exceptional lives fighting their fight with valour and compassion every single day.