



NOSTALGIA OF MONTE (The Friars and the Boys - by Tony Fernandes
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(A collection of poems & stories of the lives and times in Goa)

FOUR ANNAS AND THE LOAF OF BREAD

The difference in the daily lives and routines between the boarders and day-scholars at the school were varied and wide by comparison. I think I learned this well from day-schooling friends of mine. They had different stories to relate - from doing daily house-hold chores to helping their parents in the fields to others who had food cooked and placed ready at their tables. Some told stories of how they helped, in the fields and at home, from drawing water from the wells and going to the nearby mill to have the rationed wheat or rice ground into flour to doing the various chores around the house the whole year through, while others shied away from telling so when in fact they did.

But, I knew a day-scholar who became one of my best friends through the years at Monte de Guirim. His name was Felicio. He lived in the village of Guirim, commuting on foot every day all through my years at Monte. He always had a smile on his face and was liked by all. I admired his endurance and resilience to any given situation, come rain, floods or the hot afternoon sun. He was a very hardworking student and did well in most subjects and steadily ranked among the top ten in our class. I saw him hurrying clutching his books in one hand, or his bag over his shoulder and his lunch tin in the other, headed towards the specially allocated 'buthi'(tiffin) room. Remarkably though, what I did notice was that at times he did not carry his 'buthi', and came in straight to the class. And for many years I always wondered why. I hoped to find out and solve the mystery some day.

As it turned out, before I knew it, our final schooling year was about to end. In just another couple of months, days at Monte would be over. Finally, just before our S.S.S.Examinations, I gathered all the courage I had, and asked Felicio as to why he had not carried his tiffin (buthi or packed lunch) on certain days during his last many years at Monte. What he then related

to me was something that I definitely was not prepared for. And the story he related shocked me to the core. And then I wished I had known this all along. To my astonishment he described how on most days his mother somehow had managed to cook and provide the lunch in a tin; and how sometimes when she had fallen ill and had not been able to prepare it in time and have it ready for Felicio to take it with him in the morning. At other times his mother had left very early at dawn to work in the fields. And there were other times when they had nothing to cook at all. And those were the days when he had not brought his 'buthi'.

But, he would carry a four-paise coin (four annas) that his mother gave him safely tied to a hand-kerchief lest should he lose it and go hungry. During the afternoon break this four-paise coin would see him through with a loaf of bread from the school's kitchen and some sweets from the shop down the hill at the "T" junction.

But those kitchen servers who worked there were nice and kind. They never took money from Felicio. Nor did they know that one loaf of bread was all that he would have for his lunch. And I had not known this fact at all, all the previous years either. I wonder perhaps whether it would have mattered had I known the fact all this time. Perhaps I could have tried to help him and offer him solace. What I clearly remember is that as the afternoon break neared its end I saw him walking up the slope on the eastern side of the hill that overlooked the Church and the hills of Vaddem and Porvorim while he still kept up his smile.

I wonder whether that smile kept me away from my intention of approach. Years went by since then. We did keep in touch at times in the subsequent years after SSCE. I met him once in Mapusa in the early seventies. He was shopping for provisions along with his mother. He still carried his trademark smile. It was a busy Friday bazaar day as usual in the month of May. We both happened to be vacationing in Goa at that time, returning from work on our annual leave from different parts of the world. Felicio insisted that I join him and his mother for drinks and snacks at Café Xavier which I gladly did. We chatted about the good old days for a while. When we had finished eating he even persisted to pay as well, and I relented. Drawing his wallet out from his pocket he quickly handed cash to the waiter.

With his eyes slightly moist he looked at me – perhaps thinking of his old days at Monte - the four-anna coin and the loaf of bread! But he didn't say anything. For a while time seemed to have stood still. We both probably kept our thoughts to ourselves, reminiscing about own times at the hillock, as his mother silently looked on.

Only this time it was perhaps quite different that the afternoon meals at school - a sumptuous lunch would definitely await him today, I thought. Almost reading my thoughts he asked me to come over to his house for lunch, but I had to decline as I had to take provisions home myself. God bless him wherever he is today.

In the fascinating and enchanting, peaceful and serene surroundings of Monte de Guirim, still stands high the mighty school of St. Anthony. While on these memories I always fondly dwell, they will forever give me a reason to relate to my children the wonderful stories of the great times at Monte, chat about it with my classmates of long ago, and remember a school friend once in a while.

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