

## A Sacksful of Joy

-----G Prakash 1064/81

It was Sunday. The day when 'parents' came visiting. Anyone from home, even babes in arms, were 'parents' in the Sainik School lingo. 'Parents' was both singular and plural. Though it never mattered as to which 'ward' the 'parents' belonged to, the food they brought along mattered. There was no shortage of food or hunger in our school!

All eyes were fixed on the far end of the vast parade ground since morning. At last a tall figure in white with an almost imperceptible stoop appeared through the fine layer of dust that hung close to the ground and cheers wet up. As he got near, the familiar swept back hair, white dhoti, coarse khadi shirt and the gladdest sight of all, the bulging brown sack slung across the back banished any lingering doubt. By the time the figure had arrived at the entrance to the dormitory, dozens of children were pushing about at a respectful distance, savouring the smell of the sack's contents. The sweating man swung the sack across to the front and placed it on a table, not loosening his grip, as if afraid of losing it and looked around, oozing affection. The joyous throng allowed his son to step awkwardly forward and be petted. His gaze too remained on the sack. The crowd withdrew to a respectful distance to provide privacy to the father and son.

The 'parents' soon left and anticipation mounted. It was time to open the sack. 'Parents' and the food they brought came in various hues. One rich family would noisily arrive in a car, once a year, bearing garish plastic bags full of expensive cakes, aluva and biscuits. The elders in this group were very friendly with all children, forcing Pavlov's reflex to work overtime. But soon they would open all the packets on their ward's bed, perch on the adjacent beds and eat the whole lot, leaving only shattered hopes. There was the loving father mother

duo, who brought bananas and home foods like appams and vadas. After a little picnic under a tree, the son would generously distribute the leftovers. One NRI 'parents' came annually bearing an unbelievably tasty magical food called 'Cadbury chocolate' in glittering packing.

This the son would carefully distribute to all, for the next couple of months, in very little pieces meticulously measured with a scale and cut with a shaving blade. There was the secretive guy who never let out what his parents had brought. The housemates had to guess, based on the muffled crunching sounds and the smells that came from his bed after 'lights out' at night. Most 'parents' brought gems of the countryside, like achappam, unniyappam, sukhiyan, ethakka appam, boli etc. in little packets, which left behind more crumbled newspaper than happy memories.

However, the most endearing of all was the humble sack from Kundara. It was had neither glamour nor style. Captivating smells or enticing pictures it did not have. But it came into our lives quite regularly, bearing unforgettable joy and three to four kilos of humble brown Rusk, somehow just when we felt like a bite. Its owner being as selfless as his 'parents' had an eat-as-much-as-you-like-while-it-lasts attitude.

Even today I buy Rusk, whenever I see it. The more humble the packing, the more preferred. The kids deride the purchase, what with all the attractive rubbish around. How do I explain the love that lingers for the humble sack full of joy from Kundara that poured life into our existence once?