

SISTER THERESA

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"Ouch"! I yelped in agony, as Sister Theresa's wooden ruler came crashing down on my knuckles. My pen fell from my hand, making a mess of my already messy attempts at handwriting. "Very sloppy writing, Gandhi", she said, as she moved on to her next victim. It was Sister Theresa's Second Grade class at Saint Mary's Convent, as our penmanship session came to an end. "Next, children, we shall take up our Seven Times Multiplication tables".

"Seven times One are Seven, seven times Two are Fourteen, seven times Three are Twenty-One..." we began chanting in our singsong voices. We were studying our multiplication table by the time-honored process of endless repetition. This year, our goal was to go all the way to the Sixteen Times Table, culminating in Sixteen Times Sixteen are Two Hundred and Fifty-Six. Heady stuff for an impressionable seven-year-old lad such as I.

Saint Mary's Convent was a fortress-like establishment, perched on a hill overlooking the pretty lake town of Naini Tal in India. Although the convent was an all-girls school, classes were co-educational until the second grade. From here on, it was considered too risky to co-mingle the sexes, and male students were transferred to Saint Joseph's College, an all-boys school nearby.

Teachers in Saint Mary's were nuns, a few of whom were imported from England. The majority were Indian-born, having been converted to Christianity, and anointed with Saint-names

in the process. Sister Theresa, whose original name was Jayalalitha Ramasubramaniamiyer, was in the latter category. She was a large, dark, domineering South Indian nun, in a convent filled with domineering nuns. She was at least ten feet tall; in her black uniform, she was as scary as King Kong! Being a convert from Hinduism, her aim in life was to convert the heathens who attended the convent, and she pursued this noble goal in a very direct manner.

If a Christian student in her class did anything wrong, or gave an incorrect answer to a question, he or she was rapped on the knuckles with her ruler. With non-Christians such as myself, she would always add a morale booster after the knuckle-rapping ritual. "Don't worry, Ghandhi, you heathen. You will be going to Hell, anyway", she would say. This approach, she believed, would help us see the light, and speed us along the path to Christianity. Incidentally, she always referred to us non-Christians by our surnames, probably because she felt that Christian names were the exclusive domain of Christians.

After our Seven Times Multiplication session, she informed us that there would be a test the next day, with dire consequences for those who did not pass. In Saint Mary's lexicon, "dire consequences" meant corporal punishment, which sister Theresa did not hesitate to inflict. I suspect that this was her personal method of "Doing Well by doing Good".

I left school that day, reciting my Seven Times Tables as I walked all the way home. That evening I practiced them, and was word perfect by bed time. The next day, I went to school, fully prepared to recite them, and actually hoping that I would be called upon to do so.

Well, class started, and the time for the math quiz arrived! Sister Theresa stood up and faced the class, armed with her trusty wooden ruler in her right hand. The sight of the thing, with its number lines almost worn off from constant use on our knuckles, did not inspire confidence. Still, I was well prepared, so it did not bother me too much. Slowly, she walked around the class, looking for a victim, and eventually stopped beside me. "Stand up, Gandhi" she ordered in her stentorian voice. Without fear, I leaped to my feet, ready to turn in a magnificent performance. My Moment of Glory had arrived!

"Alright Gandhi, what is Seven times Eight?" asked the good Sister. I was stunned. The only way I knew how to answer her specific question was to run through the entire Seven Times Table; "Seven Times One are Seven, Seven Times Two are Fourteen", and so on, until I came to Seven Times Eight. I proceeded to do this under my breath. At this point, Sister Theresa, impatient at my seeming lack of progress, reached out and grabbed my left ear with her free hand. She now proceeded to twist it in a counter-clockwise direction, slowly but relentlessly, hissing "Hurry up, Gandhi, we can't wait all day for you".

Conventional wisdom has it that extreme pain sharpens the intellect. I doubt it. My eyes began to water as the pain level increased, but there was absolutely no increase in the pace of my thoughts. I found the room going out of focus, since I was seeing it through the distorted lenses of my tears. Eventually, just as it felt that my ear was about to be ripped off, I arrived at Seven Times Seven are Forty-Nine, seven times Eight are. "Fifty-Six" I shouted. Sister Theresa, startled by my outburst, let go of my ear, but still had the presence of mind to whack me on the knuckles with her ruler for shouting in class.

Many years have passed since that incident. In the intervening time, both physical and verbal abuse have been declared taboo in Indian schools, and that is a good thing. However, this enlightened approach came too late for me, and I find that my experience has permanently impaired my mathematics ability. Don't get me wrong, I still remember my Sixteen Times Table ("Sixteen Times Fourteen are Two Hundred and Twenty-four, Sixteen Times Fifteen are Two Hundred and Forty" ... and so on). But, if you asked me what Seven Times Eight was, I would have to mumble under my breath: "Seven Times One are Seven, Seven Times Two are Fourteen ...Seven times Three are...".