

[High School Daze in Rajput, India](#)

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When I decided to go to high school in India, I didn't have the foggiest notion of what it would be like. It seemed so...well, foreign, from school in the US. I had heard some funny stories from my mother and father, mostly about school pranks, eccentric teachers and unusual punishments. I especially remember the story of my mother's math teacher who, during the raging monsoon weather in New Delhi, made her students take off their mud-clogged shoes and hit themselves on the head if they hadn't finished their homework. Stories like these conjured images in my mind of a school system which was strict, rigid and, at times, comical. In the US things were different. We could chew gum in class, talk back to our teachers, wear designer clothes--or any outfit for that matter--even dye our hair orange. By the time I was only thirteen, most of my classmates had their own boyfriend or girlfriend, had tried drugs and alcohol and also indulged in sex. I felt as if I was being thrown into adulthood, without being able to complete childhood. Things were just moving so fast for me. On the one hand, American education gave me freedoms, knowledge and resources, but it couldn't give me the pure and unadulterated experience of Indian culture. So to preserve the last of my childhood days, I went to India.

In 1984, my family arrived in New Delhi on a transfer of residence. Searching for a proper school in India's capital involved touring prominent schools which were either convent-run or extremely "elite". We soon discovered that no school wanted to accept NRIs (non-resident Indians) unless we were prepared to give a hefty "donation." This was my first taste of India's notorious, the-only-way-to-get-things-done bribery sub-culture. It seems normal to everybody, like you were supposed to know all about it and agree it was ok. I didn't. Most schools required admission tests which measured your knowledge of math, English and Hindi. If you did reasonably well, you were a candidate for admission. If you knew someone in the school, your chances doubled. Connections were your winning ticket to get anything done. It didn't surprise us then, when after excelling in the admission test to one of India's best schools, my brother was turned down because

a politician's son received "preferential consideration." After almost a year of searching for a decent, donation/bribe-free school, I was admitted to the Birla Balika Vidyapeeth (Birla Girl's School), an all-girls' boarding school in Pilani, Rajasthan. These next four I'll-never-forget years in Pilani would make me conclude that Indian education is a somber reality plagued with many problems and paradoxes.

Pilani welcomed me with its wailing peacocks and sticky heat. An educational oasis at the edge of the awesome Thar Desert, Pilani was the place for academically up-and-coming students. I remember looking around and marvelling at its serenity--no cars, no scooters, no taxis. From the tall, crumbling walls of my school, I could catch a glimpse of the shining white marble of the nearby Saraswati temple, honoring the Goddess of learning. Without hot water, washing machines, central heating, proper beds or closets, I often wondered if this was the learning environment Goddess Saraswati honestly envisioned best for us students.

Soon my verdict was clear--the Birla Girls' School created an artificial environment which, in my opinion, suffocated the 500 or so girls living there. No men were allowed in any shape or form on our campus unless they were cooks or the watchman. There were two giant gates with guards around the clock and a stone wall imbedded with broken glass surrounding our campus. Even all the windows in our rooms were painted out, solid opaque green, so that no men from the college next door could catch a glimpse of us, or vice-versa. To further agitate us, each letter we received was censored. My friends and I renamed our school "central jail." While some may argue this type of environment instilled discipline and "protected" us from the "dangers" of boys, I felt it was just too unreal, even deceptive. I found it possible to forget that the opposite sex existed at all, except in our fantasies. How would we learn to interact in the real, modern world--especially in modern Indian society, where though a coeducational workplace was common, society still operated within patriarchal parameters and attitudes.

Inside the classroom was hardly any better. Our teachers, their faces often expressionless, read out of text books, rarely ad-libbing. The approach to every subject was dry and theoretical. The emphasis was on memorizing facts and formulas. Even in creative subjects like Indian and English literature, we were asked to simply read the stories and then answer unimaginative questions. We never had an opportunity to write poetry or stories or have a forum to freely share our thoughts and opinions. There were never any research papers or projects, except for simple-minded lab experiments--even though we had ample resources for far more exploratory approaches. And worst of all, there were no incentives for students, or the teachers, to excel, except for the sheer sake of competition. Ranks

were always a big concern--everyone fighting for first place.

Then there was this weird, superior status attached to studying the sciences. According to teachers and the principal, studying the "arts" was what high school girls did only because they were unable to compete in engineering or medical exams. This entrenched notion that you were not intelligent if you preferred the arts--language, literature, etc.--to the sciences made many girls feel ashamed of their natural interests and capabilities and disillusioned about their future direction and educational opportunities.

Now, having gotten that off my chest, let me say honestly I actually relished my high school days in India! I was happy to wear a simple but cute dress/uniform instead of show-off \$100 designer jeans I couldn't afford anyway. Dress codes ensured that we all looked the same regardless of family wealth or social status. That was nice. I also liked the respect that we were taught to accord each other (at least as much as teenage girls are able to do without getting giggly!) and definitely toward our elders. Most of all, I cherished the friendships that were formed. Friendship in India is something totally special, so beautiful, so close like a brother or sister. Also there was no such thing as "the most popular girl" or cool, "in-crowds" and cliques--and that whole nerve-wracking, peer-pressure sub-culture that makes high school in the USA more like a survival-training camp than a hub of higher intelligence.

Being away from our families, we only had each other. So we made the most of it, playing in the torrential monsoon rains, singing songs in the echoing hallways when we felt bored, telling goose-pimple, ghost stories when the electricity disappeared for hours. We didn't need sex, drugs or rock-and-roll to have a good time in the 1980s.

My educational experience took me from one extreme to the other. It helped me realize where the middle ground was and where I needed to strike a balance in terms of my identity and culture. It raised many questions in my mind regarding how Indian society viewed women and their opportunities. Clearly reform is needed to encourage an equal learning environment. But before any of that begins, we have to ask ourselves and the society we live in what education means for us. What goals do we want to achieve and how can we achieve them? We must acknowledge our responsibilities as teachers, whether its in the home, the school or the workplace. Only then can we even begin to compare which system is better, which

system is worse.