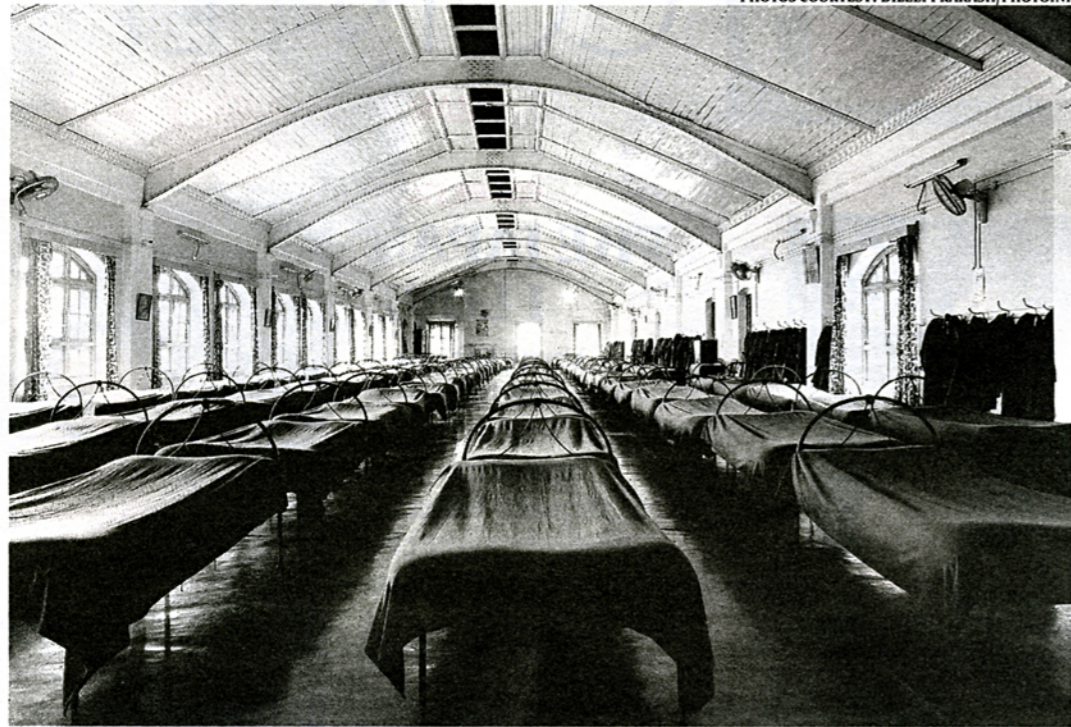


PHOTOS COURTESY: DILEEP PRAKASH/PHOTOINK



**Home Alone:**  
An empty dorm at Oak Grove School, Jharipani

# The Ghost in the Hallway

Dileep Prakash's new series of photographs returns to Indian prep schools to exorcise old demons >>>

by **SHRUTI RAVINDRAN**

**S**now-white uniforms clustered together on a grassy slope. Mugs, bristling with toothbrushes, huddled on the shelf of a communal bathroom. Serried ranks of tidy beds under the arching hangar-like roof of a well-lit dormitory. A grinning skeleton, caught mid-caper in its closet in a laboratory. Looking at the black-and-white photographs in *What Was Home*, Dileep Prakash's new series set in 19 Indian

boarding schools, may make you cast a fond, wistful eye on your own schooldays. But Prakash's own madeleine leaves a slightly sharper after-taste. It's closer to evoking the "desolate loneliness and helplessness" which George Orwell referred to as a "deeper grief which is peculiar to childhood and not easy to convey" in *Such, Such Were the Joys*, his 1954 essay recalling the privations and terrors of his time in a prep school in the 1910s. Many decades and continents apart, Prakash, who was sent to

Mayo College, Ajmer, as a nine-year-old boy in 1975, says his photographs "resonate" with similar feelings of "loneliness, fear, surprise", all of a piece with the "slightly traumatic" experience of being in a "new, alien space", far, far away from the comfort and safety of home. Repopulated with spectres of childhood fears, the photos appear transformed. The washrooms, with gleaming tile walls and a lone bathtub backed into a corner, feel like forlorn places of exposure, when Prakash

talks of the daily humiliation of the public bath he endured with 20 other children, with a matron lurking outside the door. The dormitories, crowded with beds, change from cosy to claustrophobic when Prakash describes the misfortune that he and his classmates faced in the seventh grade, when they were transferred to a senior house, and found themselves surrounded by towering, rough 12th graders who bullied them. His own treatment, he adds, was twice as harsh, as he was smaller and quieter than the others, and judged less likely to "sneak" to the teachers. Meanwhile, the tale of the ghost that returned to their water-room *ghada* to quench its thirst every night casts certain images in a new, startling light: the white blur streaming past the fluted columns of a disused fireplace, the iridescent flutter of a mosquito net above a bed, even that cheerful skeleton with dark, gaping holes for eyes.

"I got a flood of memories when I entered those spaces," Prakash says. "Those feelings were coming back." He hopes that his return to these sites — denuded of all human presence and inhabited purely by memories — will serve as a sort of exorcism. "My childhood memories shaped me as I am now. I'm hopefully laying them to rest with this project. It is a way of release for me."

The idea for this exercise of exorcism occurred to him when he visited his alma mater, Mayo College, in 2004. Between 2007 and 2010, he made repeated photographic trips to Mayo and other colonial-era private boarding schools across the country, which had been established for the sons of princes and *thakurs* in the 19th century. These included the usual suspects — The Doon School in Dehradun, Lawrence School in Sanawar, The Scindia School in Gwalior, as well as slightly lesser-known ones such as Dr Graham's Homes in Kalimpong and Rajkumar College in Raipur.

Not just had the former objects of terror vanished in these rapidly modernising schools — that ghost-magnet, the *ghada*, for instance, had been replaced by fridges and water coolers — but he also found the isolation and homesickness which he recalled so vividly greatly mitigated by the children's new access to technology. "Children today have many more means of communicating with their parents, like Skype and email," says Prakash. "But, in my time, we got to see our parents twice a year, and wrote them letters once a week — and these were closely super-



At Bishop Cotton School, Shimla, brash invective on venerable walls; (below) The Lawrence School, Sanawar

vised to make sure we didn't write anything untoward, which would trouble them." The state of flux which these schools are in also allows the occasional touch of humour, such as venerable walls and door frames covered in young, brash invective, or a painting of the Virgin Mother and Child presiding over a blackboard inscribed with

the Anglo-Indian community, which his wife belongs to, every series he has chosen to work on bears out his fondness for the archaic, the outmoded, the just-about-living anachronism. In 1999, he began photographing steam locomotives, those "iron devils" which used to take him home from school in Ajmer, and he'll next shoot another colonial vestige, those romantically decrepit *dak* bungalows which he used to visit as a child with his father, a "burra sahib" with the public works department in Uttar Pradesh.

*The Anglo-Indians*, his most well-known series, chronicles a community which he calls "the deepest vestige of the British Raj". Watching the older generation die, one by one, compelled Prakash to spend four years photographing 1,000 of them in 41 towns and cities across the country. "With every death," he says, "I used to feel like an entire chapter in history was closing."

His next series will look at yet another vestige of the Raj, a once-elite pursuit, now rapidly being assimilated by all classes: the tradition of the "honeymoon". Specifically, he'll photograph honeymooners, who pose together in romantically remote wooded locations in the hills. This time, the personal touch will get performative — he and his wife will make photographs that echo each set of lovers, down to their choice of dress, accessories, and gestures. □

(*What Was Home* is on at Photoink, New Delhi, from March 26 to May 28)



Prakash's alma mater, Mayo College, Ajmer



An empty classroom at Doon School, Dehradun



The images resonate with feelings of "loneliness, fear, surprise", all of a piece with the "slightly traumatic" experience of being in a "new, alien space"

anatomical drawings of the male and female reproductive systems. The images tell the story of these schools, whose colonial-era purpose has receded, with Macaulay's children and grandchildren replaced by, as Prakash puts it, "all-round students."

The threatened time-capsule quality, resonating with personal significance, is something that this series shares with the rest of his work. From steam locomotives to