



Friday Balcony

Gone are the days when everyone in campus knew everyone else. (Some even knew, at least by sight, a monitor lizard or two.) The members of the resident community no longer knows, or knows but not enough about their neighbours; a reflection of the world at large.

This was an issue revisited during Consultation 2016 and there have been varied responses to address it. One such was the recently launched 'Friday Balcony', the first (loosely structured) social forum in the community aimed exclusively at facilitating more staff-staff and staff-student interaction and communication.

The evocatively named monthly event, evocative of old-world charm and conversation that runs unhindered like the flowered vines on a beautiful balcony, is an evening for connection, where the dress code is just an open smile, and your reward for landing up is a peaceful, easy feeling that creeps up on you. Sitting in your tees and shorts on the lawns of the Big Bungalow, you could be strumming your guitar with the friends of your youth, watching a magic show, or listening to a talk, with food on the house.

A time reminiscent of the CMC of yore, of Aunt Ida sitting with her dear students...of evenings at Kodaikkanal.

Friday Balcony was kicked off on the 31st of March by a guest with a reputation as a student 'inspirer' and as a veritable Peter Pan for children, a man who has connected with



millions of young people all over the world. After all, which young 'un can resist a real-life super hero who can flip cars with his

bare hands, while promising that accomplishments like those on the scale he has achieved – involving national and international fame - are well within their reach?

Manoj Kumar Chopra, the 'Gentle Giant of Chattisgarh', the 'Bhima from Bangalore', is a Punjabi with a presence, standing tall at six-feet-five and big at 170 kg. His extraordinary size is matched by his extraordinary achievements - he is Asia's strongest man and the world's 14th strongest man.

While in CMC, we were unable to provide him with a car to flip. However, fortunately for the event managers, he took no offense and proceeded to rip apart a 3000-page telephone directory, break baseball bats and beer bottles, roll a *tawa* like a *chappati*, and bend wrenches and screwdrivers out of shape – all with his bare hands – as well as blow up and then into bits, a hot water bottle.



Manoj rolls a tawa



A hot water bottle, blown by Manoj, seconds before it burst

But it was not just his power and strength that was on display. Manoj also showed us his vulnerability when talking of the abject failures that he had risen from and the shame and social vilification that he had overcome. The badboy-turned-hero told the audience, mostly of students, of the 11 police cases that were registered against his name during his violent past, and how his life was turned around when he found Christ, and dedicated his life to Him.

Throughout his act, the students and children were on an off the stage, responding eagerly to his bidding to assist him, to try their hands at the various feats he performs or to play tug of war with him.



Medical students play tug-of-war with Manoj

It was an evening when we welcomed into our midst a man so different from us and yet, so similar. Without realising it, we let our guards down and put aside our problems - and our devices. Later, focusing on the moment and each other, we sipped our tea leisurely – on the Friday Balcony.