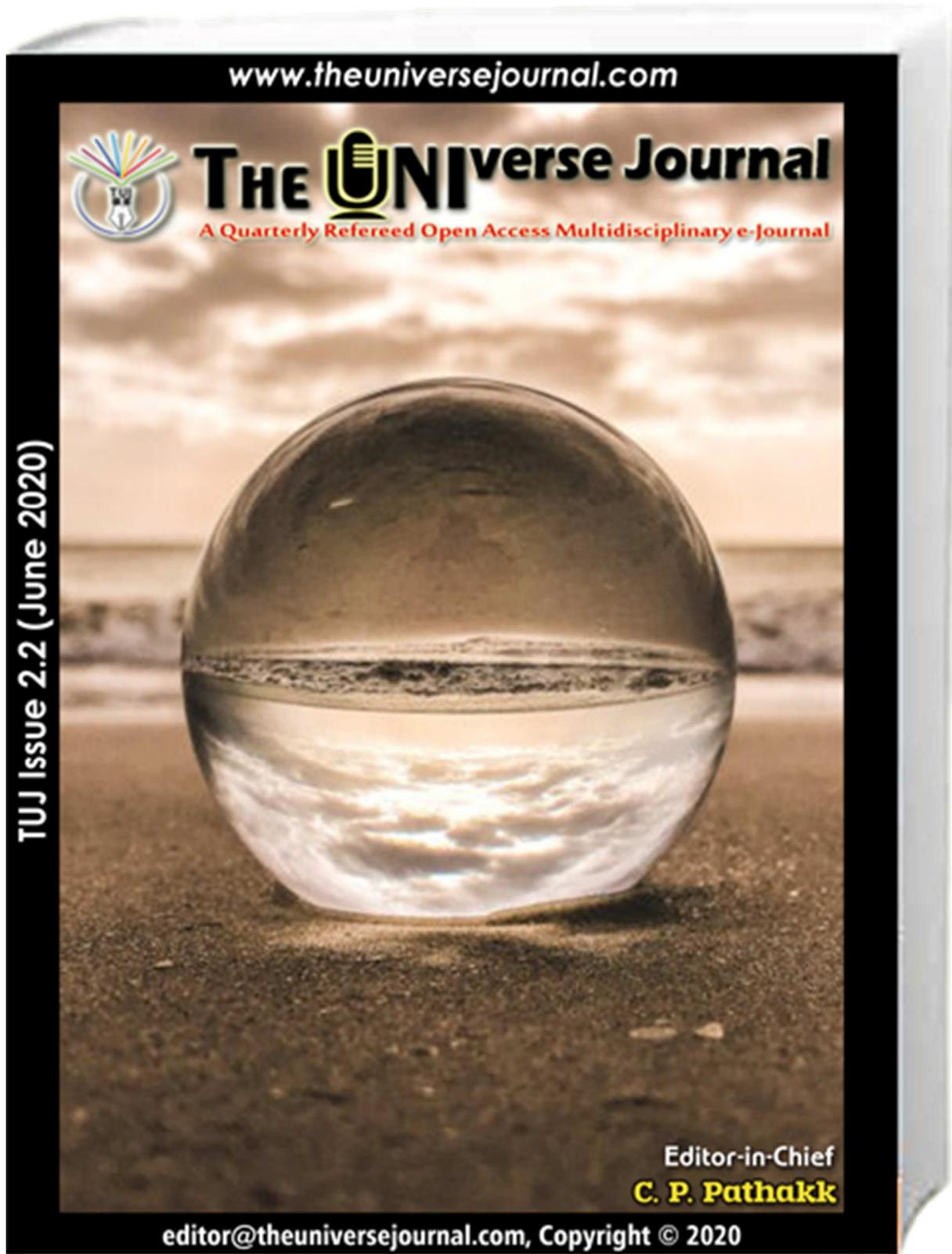


**The UNiverse Journal**  
(A Quarterly Refereed Open Access Multidisciplinary e-Journal)



**“From the Pencil to a Pen”**

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The boy, around 11, with a tall stature and wheatish complexion opens the door of his parents' room. They have a kitchen with a 'chula' and two small rooms with no bathroom. The house has a 'kucha' roof which leaks during the rainy season. His father is not at home. It was the 1990s when firing, curfews, cordons, and sloganeering were quite commonplace. These proved to be blessings in disguise for those government employees who were posted in far flung areas as they provided them an excuse to evade their work. Some blamed Indian army and others militants. The boy goes straight to the cupboard which has a mirror fixed on it and opens a small rusty metallic box. In it were some old currency notes, some antique silver coins and two packets of Charms cigarette. Out of the six in the unsealed packet, the boy takes one cigarette. He remains still for some time and then puts the cigarette in the half torn pocket of his baggy trousers. Standing in one of the potagers, after two to three puffs he notices that his sister is standing at one corner of the courtyard. The courtyard is a barren, unused piece of land which adds to their woes as the mud and sand keep coming in during the winters and the summers. The sister keeps waiting for the father to return and as soon as he comes, she rushes towards him. The father is a man with hypnagogic eyes and finely trimmed beard. He looks older than his age for his grey hair. His gait and the wrinkles on his face couldn't hide the sufferings and pain which he takes for his kids. He looks tired. With a sigh he keeps his bag on the floor and calls the boy. With all the reluctance he can gather, the boy comes near his father. The father asks him to open his mouth. A hard slap, pin drop silence, red face, teary eyes and a grinning sister is what follows.

That night was dark and cloudy. The moon could be hardly seen. A few stars in the sky were struggling hard to maintain their supremacy over the clouds. Soon his sobs turned into hiccups and sleep overcame them.

Now he has learnt the difference between km and kg. He could memorise that water means 'pani' and 'hand' means 'hath'. Unlike most of the school kids, he has to walk alone in the morning as his sister would prefer the company of her friend who was from an affluent family and whose father used to accompany her right up to the dry rotted wooden school gate with her schoolbag in his hand- a bright pink bag with a smiling Snow White on it.

With a heavy Khadi satchel hanging over his right shoulder, the boy could hardly find any motivation in attending the school. Though it was the best school of the town yet he realised it only when he was in college that the school had made a machine out of him.

Most of the teachers would make him mug up the answers to irrelevant questions asked, ironically enough under the heading 'Comprehension', in the textbooks. And in case he wasn't able to vomit out the exact words of his teachers during the class tests, 'ulte kaan' was the only remedy left in the hands of the poor teachers. Sometimes the situation would aggravate to the extent that the poor teachers were compelled to use 'moula baksh'. 'Moula baksh' was a living entity in his

school. Students who were good at cramming loved it as they never had to face its wrath whereas most of them despised it to the extreme. It used to be shifted from one room to another depending upon the efficiency of the teacher- it stayed more with apathetic teachers. 'Moula Baksh' was a long stick with a fair skin as its green bark was peeled off by the Maths teacher who would spend most of his time with it.

Unfortunately to the disappointment of his teachers, the boy could never become a mnemonist.

With an ill fitted uniform which was sewn by one of his relatives, obviously reluctantly as no stitching charges were paid, he used to enter the school as if he was forced to enter the gates of the Pandemonium of 'The Paradise Lost'. The tie which was introduced during the last session had become a headache as no one in his family knew how to tie it.

The black boards were not black as they had not been blackened for ages, the desks made creaky sounds, the teachers were mostly monotonous, the students were lazy and grumpy, the principal was an abnormally punctilious old man and the owner of the school a real life Gradgrind. The teachers, like the students, didn't know what and why they teach. The mud walls of the school were supposed to be called white.

All the classes were divided into two sections, the basis being an often quoted phrase 'fifth-subject-choice'. The two languages offered by the school were Hindi and Urdu and it goes without saying that with a few exceptions most of the Muslim students would choose Urdu and non Muslim students would prefer Hindi. The school principal informed the parents that it eases the issues related to the time-table. The old man didn't realise the serious psychological implications of this compartmentalization. Repercussions started quite late when some students of grade 10th started wearing skullcaps in the morning assembly. As a reaction the students from the other section made it a point to put a saffron 'tilak' on their foreheads.

The boy's father was contented that his son was studying in a good school. It had become his habit to talk about this feat with an air of pride. The father was right as the boy studied in a convent school. The admission brochure of the school mentioned, in bold letters, that all the students must converse in English but it was like we Indians mostly say, 'on papers only'. Days passed like years and then came the time for which every student waits eagerly. It was the time to shift from the pencil to a pen. Ball point pens were not allowed for the first two years (reasons best known to the teachers) but the ownership of 'Rallison' ink pens was no less a tour de force. For young students, pens would mean doing away with sharpeners and erasers. However ink pens had their own detriments. Most of the times using them meant broken nibs and stained hands. Nonetheless the boy was happy with his possession. After all writing with a pen gave a sybaritic feeling. He never read a single word while doing his homework as he never understood the objective behind that cumbersome exercise. However he wrote the exercise zealously for of the pens.

Sitting in a bed in their courtyard along with his parents and the illiterate cobbler who was their next door neighbour, the boy started writing his Urdu homework. The three were busy in some serious conversation. The cobbler was quite old and lean yet all the kids were afraid of him. His mere presence would petrify them.

Writing Urdu exercises was a Herculean assignment as the boy was inexplicably weak at it given that the politesse of his Urdu teacher would hardly allow him to write a word on the blackboard.

Pens had one more serious disadvantage- the mistakes couldn't be erased and thus for young students like him a wrong word written meant ten smashes of 'moula baksh' the next day. Nonetheless he put a line on the misspelled word. Somehow dissatisfied, he put another and then the third one. Before he could see if the word is no more legible, the boy received a hard slap on his left cheek with a rough homily "Wasn't one line enough". With tongue pressed under his teeth, silent abuses which he had of late learned from the older boys of his school, unuttered mutterings the teary eyed boy raised his head to see the cobbler looking at him with rufous eyes.

Such was the smack that the boy, who was in deep sleep, jumped out of his cot. It was the dead of night. He could hear the dogs barking somewhere. The only other noise which was breaking the silence of the night was an undecipherable amalgam of sermons being delivered simultaneously from the temple and the local mosque.

His sudoric and trembling hands touched his face. He felt that his right cheek still had the marks of the slap that he received from his father that afternoon.