

# Reminiscing Presidency Days

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Presidency University is now on the boil. This prompts me to go back to the mid-fifties of the last century to reminisce our days in what was then a degree college.

The year was 1956. More than a dozen of us migrated to Presidency from Belur Ramkrishna Mission Vidyamandir which was then yet to be upgraded to a degree college. The admission was strictly on the basis of results in the IA/ISC exams. Four of us got into Economics and Political Science Honours course, unlike pure Economics of today. Others branched out to English, Chemistry, Mathematics, Statistics and Physics. The faculty headed by Prof. U. N. Ghosal was probably the finest and best in Asia. In his inaugural lecture, he reminded us that we belonged to South Asia's premier institution.

Dr Bhabatosh Datta, Prof. Pravakar Sen later replaced by Prof. Tapash Mazumdar, Prof. Dhiresh Bhattacharya of the department of Economics and Prof. Ramesh Ghosh, Prof. Nirmal Kanti Mazoomdar and

Prof. Ghosal of the department of Political Science were those among the all time greats whom we were fortunate to have as our teachers and guides. But the hilarity of the Ladies Common room adjacent to our classroom was, not infrequently, annoying to them, though such distractions were no less amusing to us.

Freshers' Welcome in the Physics Lecture Theatre was a unique event. We still fondly cherish it. Principal Friend Pereira, a Goan, addressed us in his inimitable gentle style advising us to be PRS (not Premchand Roychand Scholar, but Punctual, Regular and Sociable as a true Presidencian should be). The hall witnessed a host of debates, symposia, and musical soirees attended by dignitaries like Siddhartha Sankar Roy, Amlan Datta, Sadhan Gupta, Sankardas Bannerjee, N. Viswanathan, Sudhansu Dasgupta, Debabrata Biswas et al. Manish Nundy, a batchmate and Hiranmoy Karlekar, a year junior used to floor the lecture theatre hall with their debating skills and witty repartees. Two seminars,

held in the departments of Economics and Political Science, were structured to hone cerebral powers of the students. Papers of topical interest, not necessarily within the curriculum, prepared in advance, were thrown open for discussion, debate and consensus. Occasionally, guest lecturers of eminence were invited to talk on contemporary issues. Arranging a steamer party on a January day was something we eagerly looked forward to. Fun and frolic marked the whole day till we disembarked in the evening at Babughat. Sometimes, friends from other colleges also joined us.

Politics and Presidency were inseparable even during the midfifties. From day one, 'Jholawala' seniors, while puffing Charminar, started coaxing the freshers to join the bandwagon. PCSO, then loosely called Anti-SF, was slowly gaining ground. The 1957 students' union election was a turning point for the Anti-SF combination. For me, it was a moment of triumph when I polled the highest number of first preference votes, and my overenthusiastic supporters took me on their shoulders parading through the corridors of the Arts Building.

But politics never stood in the way of congenial interpersonal relationships. No malicious campaign, no poster or wall writing, no police picket. It was all akin to cricket—a gentleman's game. Thoughts of gheraoing the principal or the faculty members or picketing inside the campus never occurred to us.

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No account of Presidency will be complete without a few words on Eden Hindu Hostel. The plaque on the wall at the entrance proudly declares the first President of India as boarder. Predominantly for the Presidencians, the hostel accommodated a few from Central Calcutta College (now Maulana Azad College), and Goenka College of Commerce. Eminent professors of our time like Dr. Amiya Kumar Mazumdar of Philosophy and Dr. Haraprasd Mitra of Bengali were the superintendents of the hostel. A few anecdotes of their times are in order. In September 1956, we decided to stage a hunger strike to protest against the quality of food and the hackneyed menu religiously served. When we met to serve the notice, Dr. Mazumdar was visibly worried and sad. While reminding us that the gestures were absolutely unpresidencian, he promised to improve matters with utmost promptitude. Yes, he was true to his word. During Dr. Mitra’s tenure, I fell sick with

fever and gastroenteritis. With no sign of abatement with local treatment, my father decided to take me back home. On hearing of his arrival, Dr Mitra rushed toward V and pleaded with him saying, ‘Yes, you can always take your son back home. But we were trying our best here. He would have come round within a day or two’. While we came downstairs near the waiting taxi, Dr. Mitra rushed to the cab saying with anxiety writ large on his face, ‘Please have the blood test immediately on arrival’.

The ‘adda’ in the hostel canteen with delectable chicken cutlet during off periods, notwithstanding the missing coffeehouse-ambience unmistakably helped us unwind after drab sessions in classrooms. Celebrating holi with coloured abir and then taking a dip in College Square, and the Saraswata sammelan, the day after Saraswati puja, are the momentous occasions which would never slip from our memory.

Our bond with our teachers reminds me of the ancient Gurukul days. Easily approachable, the relation went beyond the classroom and Professors’ common room. They were too glad to receive us at their residence to take care of any problem we had. Both Dhiren Babu and Bhabatosh Babu then lived in South Calcutta, the latter shifted to Jodhpur Park later. It would be difficult to count how many times I called on them. Notwithstanding frail health, Dhiren Babu never grudged my presence and corrected my papers and advised me as to what needed to be done.

Prof. Ghosal was an excellent raconteur. He never missed an opportunity to tell the new batch how his Swiss watch he had purchased at Zurich was giving him perfect time even after so many years. He set aside a few minutes, after completion of the day’s lecture, to suggest references for further study. There were always three sets of references, one for those who aspired to score 60% and above, the second for the mediocre, and the last for the average students. At times, he was expansive. He himself who broke the news to us that it was he who had recommended the transfer of Prof. Pravakar Sen to Central Calcutta College to the Education Department, and had wanted Tapas Mazumdar who was returning after completion of his Doctoral thesis on “The Measurement of Utility” as his replacement. Prof. Sen resigned and joined the IAS later.

Invariably, Coffee House was our second home. Of course, the presence of ‘Jholawalas’ and their animated discourse on the infallibility of Marx dominated the space. Dissenters were taunted as the disciples of “Kana Atulya”. They braved the Hare School polling booth in support of Md. Ismail, the CPI candidate against Dr. B. C. Roy in the 1957 Assembly poll. On the day the results were announced, the public telephone booth at the Hindu Hostel was jammed and initially when Ismail was leading, their thunderous applause could be heard even from the other side of College Square.

As Publication Secretary of the College Magazine in 1957, I was

groomed under the redoubtable Prof. Amal Bhattacharya, Chairman of the Editorial Board, and, of course, the affectionate influence of Student Editor, Asokda (Asok Sanjay Guha). Four lines of a poem of my batchmate Surajit Dasgupta drew flak from some members of the Board. Translated loosely in English, they would mean something like this: "One who has spent his childhood seeing the dance of the bear on the street, his adolescence in browsing through forbidden pictures and literature, is now content with a glass of beer." Thanks to the liberal Prof. Bhattacharya, the poem was published without any excision. Presidency had a glorious tradition of remembering its past Editors and Publication Secretaries whenever a new issue was published. I had a pleasant experience in 1966 when I was posted at Contai. I received a parcel which, when unpacked, was the Golden Jubilee issue of the college magazine with a oneliner on the opening page which read; "With regards to Debakida, from Pritish." The youngest of the Nundy-trio, Pritish was then the Publication Secretary. Alas, we are no longer shown such courtesy. Possibly, traditions are always meant to be broken.

During our postgraduate days, I preferred YMCA College Street branch to Presidency's Swarnamoyee hostel. Additional classes in the college and the Library were the main attractions. Besides, there is no denying that the ego factor also worked. Soon, some enthusiasts from other colleges joined us in the classes

of the stalwarts with the latter's prior approval. My association with my teachers, particularly with Bhabatosh Babu, continued till his last days. I would venture to mention two instances.

After he was awarded the Ananda Purashkar by ABP, the Sunday Magazine of *The Telegraph* approached me to take an interview of my SIR, especially his views on Development and Administering Education. He graced the chair of both DPI and Education Secretary. I was at a loss as to how to proceed. I was not equipped with tools like tape-recorder etc., I was then just freelancing. I called SIR from the Writers', and within a minute he solved the problem. I was asked to write the questions on a foolscap paper and keep some space between questions for noting the answers. The session continued for two hours at his Jodhpur Park residence on a Sunday morning.

After publication, I took the magazine to him for his perusal. After glancing over the piece, he quipped, 'Do you know you will be paid for this?' I nodded. 'No, no', he continued, 'do you know the mainstream publications hardly bother about the budding freelancers. Wait for a reasonable time and then insist on payment'.

In 1996, after his discharge from P.G. hospital after an operation, Bhabatosh Babu was keeping indifferent health. A wholetime lady attendant was in charge of him. Because of failing eyesight, headlines of leading dailies were read out to him in the morning. Visitors were not allowed as

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per medical advice and strictly screened by the attendant. Being naggingly pricked by my conscience, I called the number asking for a date and time to see my SIR. When summarily rebuffed, I told the lady to communicate my name to her patient. Within a fraction of a minute, she confirmed, Yes, any day, any time except the time between 1 to 3 pm. On a wintry morning of December 1996, I gently approached him in his first floor room. Looking completely devastated and frail, he was lying on the bed, newspapers strewn on a bedside table, a patch of sunshine falling on his pale face. Asking me to sit on a chair, he once again started proving his encyclopedic memory. For me it was difficult to resist the temptation to ask a very delicate question. Who, among his students scattered throughout the globe, had impressed him most and was very dear to him? Instantaneous came the reply: SUKHAMOY. The warning bell rang. And I had to leave the floor. Bhabatosh Babu left for his heavenly abode on 11 January 1997.