



English Studies: The Presidency Legacy

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I was a student for three years, then a teacher for nearly nineteen, in the English Department of Presidency College. It seems appropriate to write about the lessons for English studies, especially in India, that I carried away from there or developed on that basis. Much has been written about the illustrious teachers of the Department, often in a vein of sentimental rapture that trivialized or even misrepresented their serious professional contribution. It may be useful to focus on how they approached their discipline, and what legacy they have left their successors.

I had the singular good fortune to be taught by Presidency's last full range of luminaries in English studies, and then to work with some of them. They were very different from one another – in fact, they had their differences in every sense, as any group of intelligent humans must do. But they appeared to subscribe to a common academic ethos and agenda. They modified it in the light of experience, and in response to new developments in the discipline and its supporting technology. That is the first thing to remember about their legacy: like any worthwhile legacy, it needs to be constantly assessed and redefined. Uncritical imitation is poor homage.

To start with the most down-to-earth, they firmly anchored the discipline in primary texts. This should be too obvious to state, but much literary scholarship seems virtually to cultivate an avoidance of the text. That is patently true of rote-learning for exams, but also at more exalted levels of literary analysis. Yet deep analysis of texts must be admitted as the core task of literary scholarship, one to which no other discipline aspires in the same way. For the rest, students of literature make tentative forays into various sectors of philosophy, linguistics, history and the social sciences – even, rarely, mathematics and the 'true' sciences.

One might even say uncharitably that they do half-bakedly what specialists in those fields do fully and well. But when it comes to analysing textual or documentary material, literary scholars can offer their expertise to the rest. Sadly but irreversibly, we have come to confine the term 'textual studies' to a single branch of our discipline; it should fitly be applied to everything that happens in a department of literature.

The text, then, and the whole text; but nothing but the text? Here we may pause. My student days preceded the advent of what is now designated the Age of Theory. It began around the time I started teaching, but made little impact in India at first, especially in a conservative institution like Presidency. In this context, 'theory' is a makeshift catch-all phrase for a wide range of approaches and pursuits, often disjunct from or even incompatible with each other. Some fields of theory penetrate far more deeply into the text than conventional literary criticism, usually to draw philosophic conclusions on verbalization and communication. Other fields place texts in various psychological, social and historical contexts and study them chiefly in that regard: feminism, postcolonialism, new historicism and psychoanalytic criticism, to name only four that have enjoyed wide vogue. In other words, these fields of theory use texts as instruments to explore other terrains.

There need be no conflict between these two overarching agenda of theoretical inquiry, one immersed in the text, the other transcending it. Each can, should, and in the best practice does serve the needs of the other. Yet they often seem to operate in isolation or even opposition. Committed theorists can be impatient of the text, applying pre-set premises to the works they address instead of shaping the

premises in the light of the works. Yet those premises can be valuable in intent and perspective, illuminating the works more than conventional exercises in close reading. Both approaches can pass into the clichéd and unproductive: the tired idiom of a depleted liberal humanism against the arrogance of newfound, self-absorbed doctrines. It is left to the rare individual scholar to combine the two in an integrated inquiry. We have not worked the task into the basic pedagogy of our discipline.

The last half-century has thrown up another challenge that specially concerns countries like ours. To be worth pursuing at all, many lines of theory must engage with the theorist's immediate social or historical situation. In a department of English in, say, India, this means passing beyond the ambit of literature written in English or, indeed, literature of any kind. Across India, English departments are morphing into departments of Culture Studies. This would be a welcome development were it not that – in not only financial but, more crucially, academic terms – it is proving a cut-price deal to have two departments, or indeed several, for the price of one. We can end up doing badly in the English department what we should be doing well in the Bengali or Hindi or Marathi or Tamil department, or a department of sociology, film studies or art history. We are also forgoing by default the expansion of English studies into the study of other Western languages, histories and cultures, for which our universities usually have no other provision. We value, even to adulation, Western scholarship in Indian and other non-Western fields of study; but we would rob ourselves of the scope, as a mature nation, to extend our own efforts in the opposite direction.

I think it fair to say that the old Presidency tradition of English studies provides a rich model for this outward-looking expansion of our discipline while being unduly neglectful or hostile to its engagement with our closer cultural ambience. The former model is all the more crucial in being virtually unique: as decades of library acquisitions bear out, the Presidency training reached out to other languages, cultures and art forms (especially the visual arts), affording admirably wide entry to a global and multimodal culture before those terms were invented. Now that the age of globalization is upon us, it often proves to enforce a restrictive uniformity; and multimedia can have a diffusing rather than enriching effect. We may have something to gain from the Presidency example of what was, in its day, a modest but proactive exercise in liberal humanism.

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Such ventures beyond set curricular limits (and those limits were very narrow indeed in the English syllabus of the day) involve some practical problems. They require much more infrastructure than is commonly allowed to humanities departments even today. Forty years ago, a classroom with benches and a staff table with a few teacups would be considered furnishment enough. Any equipment, or even books not directly relevant to the syllabus, had to be fought for, often without success. Taraknath Sen fought many battles with the bureaucracy for a record player and enhanced library grants to procure, among other treasures, a rich collection of art books, unmatched in all or most art colleges in India. They were a mainstay of Arun Kumar Das Gupta's strategy to lead us into the intricacies of the European Renaissance. This array of resources was central to the elaborate pedagogic framework that Professor Sen, more than anyone else, gifted the English department, as a potential (though seldom adopted) model for the College as a whole. Twenty years later, I played my part in a battle to buy the College's first photocopier. I also hailed with gratitude the efforts of Subrata Datta, then Head of Physics, to set up a small computer lab where many teachers including myself made first contact with a PC.

Funding agencies have now accepted the need for a modicum of equipment in the humanities, though usually far below requirements. We can fault them the less in that many scholars in the humanities are themselves reluctant to use technology. Projection facilities and audio-visual aids to classroom teaching are acknowledged more often than employed. The imaging technology and, vastly more, the computational analysis that can transform research into texts are largely ignored, with a suspicion bred by unfamiliarity.

The suspicion is not unfounded. The often misguided

efforts of computer enthusiasts do not help matters, for they would make an agent of the instrument, claiming for the machine what only an intelligent human can deliver. This is not the place for a reasoned advocacy of digital humanities, but the task needs doing. This is specially so because, though digital humanities has few worthwhile centres in India as yet, it has lately become something of a catchword to benefit private institutes and commercial outfits of dubious credentials.

Even more imperative is the need to provide adequate resources, both physical and electronic, for simple consultation rather than analysis. The physical component – most simply and crucially, books – should not be dismissed with the fatuous catchphrase ‘It’s all there on the Internet.’ It just isn’t, for any serious study of the humanities. Meanwhile, the availability of books has declined alarmingly. As a young scholar, I could find nearly all the books I needed for serious research in the Presidency library or, failing that, at Calcutta University or the National Library. One cannot say the same today of all Kolkata’s libraries put together. The situation is still bleaker at other metropolitan centres in India. Yet there has been no discussion whatsoever towards the pooling of library funds, collaborative purchases, cross-institutional access to research scholars, or any other plan to share resources, let alone any serious demand to enhance them.

Yet I would say that the prospects of research in English literature – and I do not mean only Indian writing in English – have expanded in recent times for scholars based in India. That is partly owing to the greater scope for short-term travel to libraries abroad; but chiefly because a great store of material is indeed ‘there on the Internet.’ Much of it is on open access and, for most part, can be freely and legally downloaded. As much if not more (and that often the most valuable, whether primary material or the best recent research) can only be accessed through pay sites, usually at a staggering expense beyond the reach of any Indian university or even a consortium: institutions in the affluent West are groaning under the burden. Yet access them we must if we are to achieve an international profile that, to be honest, India-based research in English studies (as opposed to undergraduate training at the best institutions) cannot claim at present and never has done. The UGC’s INFLIBNET is a major resource but, sadly, the only one, fulfilling just a fraction of basic needs in the humanities. The National Library subscribes to some valuable databases, but they can only be accessed on-site. A

particular state university might have achieved something by its sole funds and efforts. But as with books, there has been no attempt by institutions to collectively obtain funds for shared access to at least a few key databases; nor to tie up with international consortiums that would allow us to share the sites available to partner institutions.

Given our ground realities, no single institution can set up a viable platform for such resources; but Presidency’s old savants, painfully gathering material that seems meagre and technologically primitive today, offer an example of academic asset-creation that we would do well to follow. I think of Taraknath Sen, fighting yet another battle with a clueless administration to acquire a set of the British Library catalogues that were, in the 1960s, the biggest single-window research bibliography in the humanities. Today, of course, they are available online free of cost, like the vastly expanded successor to the English Short-Title Catalogue of yore, and many other basic research tools. I think of Sailendra Kumar Sen, expending labour, money and waiting time to obtain photocopies of old Shakespeare editions for his internationally-acclaimed work on textual criticism: what might he not have done today with the Internet Shakespeare Editions and other sites a mouse-click away. I think of Arun Kumar Das Gupta, dragging heavy art books to class to show us a fraction of the reproductions that he could now download from the Internet. These are inspiring and humbling memories. We lavish unproductive nostalgia on these masters; but as an academic community, we have done little to emulate their devotion to resource creation. I am not talking of Presidency alone but the state as a whole, which has benefited no less from the Presidency legacy.

There is a last issue I would briefly raise. Implementing a varied and dynamic curriculum, extending it to co-curricular studies and outreach, and summoning the initiative for focused resource creation – all these ends call for confidence and freedom of operation in the faculty carrying out hands-on academic activity. This was what the old Presidency College, a government institution ‘bound hand and foot by red tape’ in Dickens’s phrase, so cripplingly lacked, and what it might hope to achieve in its new autonomous avatar as a University. The premises inherited by the new University were rightly judged inadequate; swift and welcome steps have been taken to extend them. I hope the unflagging spirit of the old teachers may work fully and fitly, as it could not in their own time, to fill those rooms with assets and those corridors with spirited voices.