

Entering The Fifties : Recollections of Midcentury Presidency College

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I studied at Presidency College, Calcutta, from 1949 to 1954, between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two. The first two years were in the Intermediate in Arts classes, the next two for Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History, the last in what was then called the Fifth Year of the Post-Graduate History classes of Calcutta University. I completed neither the Sixth Year nor the M.A., though I was registered for them in Presidency College.

I first made the long journey north to enter a modern but charmed heritage in the company of only one classmate, who used consistently to stand first in School, Ranendra Kumar Gupta (who joined Shaw, Wallace and Sons after his M.A.).

The College was an imposing presence. A locality in itself, it was cut off from the already sordid bustle of College Street, or the YMCA restaurant with its sleazy cabins on Bhabani Dutta Lane, where aspirant couples *en rendezvous* could draw curtains on their prying classmates. Contacts with the milieu were the Coffee House in Albert Hall (a surrogate canteen – the once famous Ray Mashai behind the College building had closed down in the late 1940s); the bookshops with access to the shelves behind the counter; the Prajnananda Pathagar opposite Sanskrit College controlled by the old misogynist ex-terrorist Kiran Mukherjee who showed you the latest political books and let you talk to Saumyendranath Tagore; a sports goods shop behind Krishnadas Pal; or D. Ratan, the photographer who would occasionally be brought in with his vast antique bellows camera under a black sheet to cover his head while he whipped his exposure plates on and off for group photos of Seminars, Union Secretaries,

and a medley of other occasions.

The story went that Principal James of venerable memory at the beginning of this century had prevented even the redoubtable Eurasian Sergeants of Police from entering the college precincts in search of students suspected of anarchism. Inside, the grounds were unfenced. College students did not trespass on the Hare School ground; the only time I trod it was for learning theodolite surveying for the Geography Pass classes. The College grounds stretched to the west wall, where the Derozio auditorium was later planned by Principal Jatish Chandra Sengupta, as part of the 1956 Centenary largesse from the Education Department. At the northwest corner were two tennis-courts. Tennis balls were provided by the College Athletic Union which oversaw maintenance: students had to bring their own rackets to play. In 1950-51 at least, Professor Abdul Wahab Mahmood (already a veteran notability of the Calcutta South Club in Woodburn Park) and his good friend from Dacca days, Professor Bhupesh Chandra Mukherjee, both much-liked History teachers, used to form a doubles team against College sportsmen like Amit Mukherjee, Gilani or Arabinda Ray. Cricket in winter was a gala occasion, watched by non-players like myself from the Baker Laboratory steps in front of the Geology Department, with great barracking gusto – where one's revered exemplars were Sambit Chatterjee (1949-51 and 1952-56) and Pradip Sarkar (of the same period). Feared opponents whom the barracking sought to rattle (when the latter was not directed against one's own friends) were Vidyasagar College, in which performed the famous Pankaj Roy. The College sports were great fun. Portly teachers were encouraged to

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puff along in races. Even I with my bulky frame got my only cups ever, being actually roped in by Kalyan Dutta Gupta (one year senior to me), General Secretary of the College Athletic Union, to be the pillar in the tug-of-war.

And when there were no events but just a lazy autumn or spring afternoon, we'd often scamp language classes and tuck ourselves, three or four of us, in a corner of the lawn, hearing someone sing Rabindrasangeet or IPTA songs. In a house on Bhabani Dutta Lane beyond the wall, an invisible gramophone would often also play these records, and if perchance I hear them now, they flood back memories of those sun-drenched afternoons chatting with Ranajit Chatterjee or the late Gagan Dutta or Kalyan Sengupta (who suddenly passed away as these lines were being drafted), Nitish Kumar Sengupta, or Alok Banerjee, Anadi Banerjee or Suchitra Chakravarti of the next years' students.

Another institution was the space between the arches on the ground floor verandah where baffle walls were bricked up in a stupid way in 1962. Here the *adda* was less continuous and more formal. The few girls in each class – co-education had begun a few years before – could chat with boys here, or in the corridors. The mixed *adda* in the lawn or in the Coffee House was only for daring Rabindriks : I was certainly not among them. In the early fifties the number of women to men in the classes was miserably disproportionate. The gender reactions were correspondingly inhibited or repressive. There were also the formal Common Rooms. Women and men did not penetrate into each other's Common Rooms. There was no lady teacher yet. The two Men's Common Room chambers, just ahead of the staircase well, were dark, grimy and antiquated, tables and chairs black with age; in the inner one we played table tennis interminably. This was the haunt of the Union bosses and their aspirant acolytes. Among the latter, I am sorry to say, I was soon counted.

In College, the Union was the battlefield

between the "SF" and "anti-SF" groups. The SF was the front of left-minded youth. They were united by a broadly socialist and anti-imperialist ideology, fuelled by the IPTA, by Sukanta's poems, by the experience of the Bengal Famine and Partition, and by a realization that India should struggle for a non-capitalist path of development. But I found their socialism bookish. Confused and without any real commitment, I gravitated to the negativist "anti-SF" bloc. This was composed of the hearties who dominated the Athletics Union, of social conservatives and personally pious people repelled by the agnosticism and free thinking then encouraged by the genuine Left, and of groups of North Calcutta students accustomed in their schools to jeer at preciosity of intellect and yet to throw their weight about in efforts to attract attention. Of course, I could identify many who were the SF-ites, but now having little sympathy for proletarian, or even liberal, causes. Among my friends of the 'anti-SF' front, I doubt if there was any desire to think beyond patronage in organising 'functions' (what, today, the more Yankeeified youth call 'fests') or controlling disparate blocks of votes.

These votes were calculated by an abstruse method of proportional representation which helped in getting second or third preferences elected, if not enough of the same voting cohort liked the same person well enough to give decisive first preferences. That at any rate was how I got elected as a class representative or later pluralist Debate as well as Tennis Secretary in both Unions. Prof. Bhabatosh Datta, briefly teaching Economics before he left on a high assignment to the IMF in Washington, who participated in supervising the counting one year (traditionally presided over by the Bursar) explained to some of us, I recall, in my first awestruck conversation with him that this was part of the practice of liberal democracy ! To us in the 'anti-SF' it seemed a good way of capturing what in eighteenth century Britain was loosely called "patronage" as distinct from

"ideology" which we thought was the SF's privilege.

In I think September, soon after we joined College, students were protesting against a particularly shocking case of graft in marking answer scripts of our own Matriculation Examination that year which newspapers had uncovered in the highest echelons of Calcutta University. Police patrolling Peary Charan Street had clashed with Eden Hindu Hostel SF-ites at night and mercilessly beaten them with *lathis*. The SF called a strike a few weeks before the Puja Vacation, and those of us eager to savour our classes to the full, resented being stopped by pickets on the great stairway. Joined by a few others, we thought there was some other way up and if only we could get in, the teachers would surely go to the classrooms, ready to work for us since we wanted to listen to them. But the sweepers' staircase was shut from inside and we were caught sneaking around, pitifully looking for some notice which would legitimate from the authorities the permission for us to go home. We were still naive enough to think that our parents would be angry with us for going home before classes were formally dissolved. The picketeers decided to brand us as blacklegs. One of them, Anindya Kusum Dutta, organised an impromptu meeting on the steps with SF sympathisers idling around. I tried to cover my fright by trying to say why I thought "strike" was industrial action, not relevant to educational practice. What about solidarity with beaten fellow-students, brayed the listening posse – somewhat like a ragging mob. I became tongue-tied and stuttering and sensing that there was no fun in the game, I was pushed, not too violently, off the stairs to the floor. One of those who did so became later one of India's eminent Geography teachers; a year later he was to be a victim of an "anti-SF" – led attack, in which I am afraid I played a minor part, as the Union passed into our stewardship. Violence bred violence, but still in those days, unlike now, at petty schoolboyish level.

In our Third Year, after the anti-SF took over the Union, the Students Federation organised a mobilisation on, I think, All India Youth Front scales called Peace Week, where support for human rights, democratic unity on a non-sectarian basis and causes of solidarity against imperialism were propagated through wall papers, posters, seminars and meetings. The Union Secretaries, though anti-SF, were associated in these events which were very ably organized by Sipra Sarkar of History, respected by all in the College. She involved me in part of the work. I think this was when I began to see that everyone in the Left movement was not pretentious or vapid, that the best among them were committed to working with others in a broadly democratic front, that they were less cliquish or factional than most younger anti-communists already behaving like regional leaders similar to those in national authority. I had been personally friendly with the late Sukhamay Chakravarty since 1949. He had already become a familiar of Sipra's father Prof. Susobhan Sarkar's household discussion circles. It was these two who gave me the urge to come closer to the Left.

If we indulged in bawdy gossip and whiled away afternoons watching the Hindi movies of Nimmi and Madhubala and Suraiya in crusty little show-houses in Bowbazar, Harrison Road or Lower Circular Road, I also learnt a great deal from Gagan Dutta or Sukhamay Chakravarti, who introduced me to Gordon Childe's *Penguins* on prehistory, D. C. Somervell's abridgement of Toynbee's *Study of History* or Spengler's *Decline of the West* or G. P. Gooch's *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, recommended by Prof. A. W. Mahmood, which I read with great profit. Many years later when my own children were gravitating towards Presidency and I somewhat resented their wanting to become part of a self-conscious social elite, an acquaintance who taught in the College, reassured me that they might not learn very much formally from the classrooms and the formal syllabus might

well be depressing; but if they could hold their own in the canteen and in the other College addas while retaining their integrity, they would pick enough from their *comperes* to stand them in good stead in later years. That I suppose is what happened to me in my own time.

This doesn't mean that I didn't learn formally. I did so most in three subjects, English, Geography and History. Sanskrit, my optional paper in IA classes, and Bengali were, in that period, not taught with imagination or precision. I had taken Sanskrit to improve my Bengali grammar and vocabulary, weak because I had studied in a totally Westernised pedagogical system. Pandit Gaurinath Sastri took classes on the second chapter of the *Srimadbhagavadgita* and Prof. Janardan Chakravarti on pieces like "*Phullarar Baromashya*" and "*Radhar ki koilo antare byatha*" with very vocalised emotion. I am sorry, but all that I learnt from such texts was from my own attempts to learn them by heart, as well as from books on their historical context searched out from libraries. It was much later that I came in touch with really rigorous Bengali and Sanskrit scholars. But I did regret, even those days, that neither our indigenous scholars nor Sanskrit College, where Pandit Gaurinath Sastri took our classes in 1950, had any need for us. We went up the iron stairs to the first floor rooms on the left, and all we sensed of the library where Vidyasagar or Mahesh Chandra Nyayaratna must have worked, was a dark door, entry into which was not inviting. The withdrawal of Sanskrit pandits from the forces of progress in new India in the twentieth century was already clear. Purushottamdas Tandon, briefly the Congress President who left after differences with Pandit Nehru, was taken in procession by Hindu sannyasis in saffron and ashes along College Street, much to our disgust in our College. But not even the reactionary Hindu Mahasabha appeared to have any contact with Sanskrit College.

English, on the other hand, was taught with panache by a variety of teachers. Prof.

Subodh Chandra Sengupta and the late Prof. Tarapada Mukherjee belonged to the old critical school, explaining verses and paragraphs as they went along, speaking of general contexts, on the lines of Swinnerton, Quiller-Couch, or at best Bradley and Legouis and Cazamian. Tarapada Babu's delectable and quaint enunciation of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and of *Othello* held our imagination, more than our intellect. To my infinite regret, Prof. Taraknath Sen did not teach the Intermediate batch in which I was. His health confined him most of the time to his little cubby hole inside the library stacks; so he took no B.A. Pass classes. In 1953 I attended his post-B.A./B.Sc. I.A.S. coaching class (non-credit for Presidency students only) but only for a few days; but I learnt two things from him. One, his commitment to textual and contextual deconstruction of set pieces to get at their deep structure, something that I would later find to be the most exciting thing taught in the classical tradition abroad as well as at home in the late 1950s. Two, his advice to read, as a habit, a good newspaper's centre page, to savour current English idiom, such as the *New Statesman* or the *Observer* if I could get them in the British Council Library (set up in 1952, I think). Prof. Amal Bhattacharjee, not yet then the formidable legend that he became in the late 1960s, was a refreshing new breeze – calling for a deep feeling for poetic diction and emotion, whether it was in *L'Allegro* or *Il Penseroso*, or Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Wreck of the Deutschland" or "Margaret, are you grieving". The English teachers taught me to like as dissimilar writers as Coleridge, Shaw or Upton Sinclair; my taste for Bankim, Saratchandra, Tarasankar or Satinath came from my own domestic circle, not from the Bengali classes. This affinity for literature inspired in me a taste for narrative, without which the study of the reconstruction of the past becomes arid.

A childhood liking for map reading, gained from the *Statesman* and its special wallsize war maps in 1943-45, had given me a taste for

topography and a bump of locality. This was amply assuaged by four years of Geography in College. Till 1951, that was a part of the Geological Department with its vast laboratory in the Baker Laboratory, where unlike most Arts students, I had the privilege of studying. Cartography was by far the most exciting. Bygott's excellent manual gave one a feel for the variety of projections, their modes of construction, and the analysis of topo-sheets. Prof. Amiya Bhushan Chatterjee, who taught us the bulk of the subject, clarified the logic of human settlement and introduced me to the ideas of Lyde or Kropotkin. Later Nitish Sengupta, Salil Ghose and myself followed an expanded department to its present quarters in the old building under Prof. N. R. Kar whose brusque approach contrasted with Prof. A. B. Chatterjee's easy friendliness. One heard many interesting talks, both at the Geological Institute and at the Geography Seminar where Nirmal Kumar Bose, whom we knew as Gandhi's companion in Noakhali and who later became one of India's great anthropologists, spoke as a trained geographer on linear village patterning in the active and moribund deltaic areas of Gangetic Bengal.

All this added up to a genuinely interdisciplinary training, such as even Oxford did not give me, at least in my undergraduate years there. There were Union special lectures in the Physics Theatre – Sir Jnan Chandra Ghosh, the first Director of the first I.I.T. at Kharagpur, spoke superbly on the industrial use of high octane fuel and petroleum technology. The Indian, Dr. Cheddi Jagan and the black descendant of slaves, James Burnham, the first leftwing leaders of British Guiana who later fell out in Bonapartist wrangles, came in 1952 upholding the cause of democracy, repressed by British neocolonialism. Buddha Bose, who had trekked to Manasarovar, showed his stunningly beautiful silent movie of that Shangri La in the high Himalaya. A rather bewildered group of Yankee students from Berkeley, California, were dumped on us by

the West Bengal Government for a debate. SF friends turned this occasion into an all-out attack on Americanism which left the guests resentful and the students amused. The debates were often of high standard – Shibendu Ghosh and Mohit Lahiri (one went into the IAS to rise to Defence Secretary, the other becoming an eminent doctor, both to die tragically middle-aged) spoke in a Past versus Present Students' debate in Foundation week one January; Utpal Dutt, Sadhan Gupta, Prof. Hiren Mukherjee and the late Sudhangshu Dasgupta came as guest speakers, and in my own Third Year, when I was Debate Secretary – too unsure of words, still too scared to face an audience, Amartya Sen, a newcomer in the Third Year Honours classes, having stood First from Santiniketan in the Intermediate Science examinations. He brought wit and polish in opposing a motion on which I had organised a Bengali debate "*Bangla Sahitya Abanatir Pathey*", a debate which aroused a great deal of stimulation for its contributions from a variety of students. There were also musical soirees in the College Library Hall, cinema shows in South Calcutta, a much-looked-forward-to steamer picnic on the River Hooghly, and annual amateur theatricals in hired halls like the Rangmahal (or Star, I forget which) and the still very posh New Empire, where one learnt the mechanics of theatre production and management, though the aesthetics of direction were still sadly lacking. Prof. Bhabatosh Datta in his memoir *Sat dashak* has a cheerful account of the very subaltern role played by me in Parashuram's "*Birinchi Baba*". I was selected to be the stupidly Anglicised O. K. Sen, perhaps a comment of some sort by the selectors, but it was promotion from being the rural *mandal* No. 3, wagging one's knees under the village banyan tree in Rabindranath's "*Yaksher Dhan*" acted the previous year !

With all the fooling around which accompanied these junkets, where did the serious work come in ? By and large, it came in my case from a focus created by the teachers

of the History Department, in whom we were singularly fortunate. Ancient Indian history was the weakest. The late Prof. Charu Chandra Dasgupta, who had written a thesis on the Kharoshthi script at Cambridge University was idiosyncratic and somewhat obscure; but his erudition impelled respect and he was compulsively interested in his subject to the extent that he lost himself in it without bothering who else was. The late Prof. Sashi Bhushan Chaudhuri joined the West Bengal Educational Service from Dacca, displaced by the 1950s riots (when Dr. A. B. M. Habibullah had to leave Calcutta University Islamic History and Culture Department for Dacca). Sashi Babu's teaching of late ancient and early mediaeval India was not greatly inspiring. But his personal example was. Struggling in dismal lodgings in Beliatala Road with his wife's incurable illness and loss of his property, he worked away during his leisure hours at weekends, from old Gazetteers and Parliamentary Papers in an overhead caryll of the new National Library at Belvedere, at his book *Civil Disturbances in British India, 1757-1857*. The late Prof. Chandikaprasad Banerjee joined in early 1951 – much to our initial ire, as we had been expecting the transfer of Dr. Tapan Raychaudhuri from Central Calcutta College. Chandika Babu did his best to help us with Indian history, in which the college was then not very strong as it specialised more in European history with an overbearing Eurocentric Westernism in its interpretations. Prof. Mahmood was one among the most formative influences on our general outlook; above them towered Prof. Sarkar, leonine in appearance and manners. All were more friendly than the English teachers, who were more conservative, more superior in their ways, and who took it for granted that students like me who got high marks in the college examinations, would take Honours in their subject, which meant going to the House of Lords in Presidency. When I got less than 50% in my I.A. History paper, this is what I was informed by Prof. Subodh Sen Gupta. In

perplexity I sought the advice of my father, who had all along hoped I would read English in the Honours as he had done from 1916 to 1918. Authoritarian my father certainly was, but never so in matters of common sense or rationality. He was explicit. I should read what I thought my heart would be in, not where the marks were. I have never looked back from History ever since.

The Seminar room, where our Honours classes were held, was to the right of the staircase well, as one went up to the first floor. I cannot be the only old student who has a sense of disjunction to find it engulfed in the student admission office, where Shri Dilip Roy has presided for a quarter century now. Two little cubicles had been carved at the back – one for the Head of Department though he mostly sat and stalked back and forth like a "Tiger" (Nitish Sengupta's and my private reference for him) in the main Teachers' Room; and one for the cupboard of precious reserved Seminar textbooks, passed on with care from year to year by the Head of Department's careful and ever-present guidance and advice. N. K. Sengupta was Seminar Secretary in our Year and with Partha Sarathi Gupta and Benoy Bhushan Chaudhuri, the three best students of our batch. Ashin Dasgupta and Diptendra Banerjee had been the best students of the previous year (with Hirendranath Chakravarti appearing with them in the B.A. examinations after falling ill the previous year). Both years met to discuss papers prepared by teachers and students. Prof. Sarkar chaired – not always friendly, but rapier sharp in his somewhat frightening, more give than take, discourse. Prof. S. B. Chaudhuri read a paper on "Republican Polities in Ancient North India" which had them at each other, hammer and tongs, over distinguishing between republicanism and mere oligarchy. In my Fifth Year, I perked up enough courage to write down some of my doubts about "The Periodization of Indian History" for the College Magazine in 1954. And the History Department brought out a wallpaper. In 1954, I

was its Secretary or Editor, with Amalendu Banerjee (1951-1955, one of the finest scholars and people I have ever met, who studied for some time in Oxford and is now I believe a senior IAS officer in Haryana) as a coadjutor. We had a board constructed, bought the stiff cartridge paper and brought out our own articles in our own handwriting. I remember submitting a photograph and article on the rural mediaeval antiquity, the Bager Masjid at Bager Morh between Kanchrapara and Kalyani, then just about to fall into ruins (it used to look like a single domed version of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya). Wallpaper journalism was very much in vogue in the early Fifties, with skits, poems and articles which came from our pens in constant flow.

The final function of the Seminar in my time was the Reunion Tea organised by Prof. Susobhan Sarkar in 1954 autumn just before I left for my first stint in Oxford. He had a big ledger, with names and classes of all Honours students since his own time in 1919 (or was it 1921) written in a neat, copperplate hand. He set our batch and that of Sambit Chatterjee and Sankar Sen (1950-56) to finding out their present addresses as far as possible, roping them in for the tea, and raising expectations for the Centenary Celebrations of 1956. I had stopped attending classes preparatory to going abroad and was therefore given the work of preparing an index list of all names of History Honours students that could be reconstructed for the twentieth century. This was printed and distributed.

Finally the Magazine. In our time, its Editorship was the supreme accolade the teachers could bestow on the best Arts alumnus of the year. Sipra Sarkar had been Editor, succeeded by Arun Dasgupta of English who meticulously edited my first ever article on "Mirza Raja Jai Singh". My piece was culled from Tod and Jadunath Sarkar's annals. Then came Ashin Dasgupta, followed by Sukhamay Chakravarty. Even to be elected a Publication Secretary by the Union and to get one's name in the roll of honour going back to

the First War years was supposed to be a mark of note. In our year, Kalyan Dasgupta in History (now Vice-Chancellor, Kalyani University) was the elected Secretary with Arunda, much to my envy as the defeated anti-SF contestant for the post. Among the articles and pictures, two are indelible. One a light brush sketch of a tree in the Birbhum lateritic terrain – gaunt and bare – by Gopal Ghosh the great artist; the other a scintillating Bengali article called "*Bigyapaner Arthaniti*", "the Economics of Advertising", exposing the myth of much value being added by marketing or media, written by Amartya Sen.

These random recollections could be drawn out endlessly. They testify to the imprint the College ambience, not just people, not only later famous people, left on one's mind. It is the ambience that predominates. The locality and its autonomy from its milieu played a part. The part-conscious elitism was cultivated by references to tradition in each Department, Seminar or Institute (after all the Indian Statistical Institute had just before that shifted from its first home in the Baker Laboratory, and people still talked of its staff). Of this cultivation, one can refer to a similar trend in English public schools like Westminster.

But my studies in Presidency College were at the end of one epoch of unanimity in the Anglo-Bengali elite's circulation. The *bhadralok*/gentleman hegemony had then lasted for a century in Bengal. Its capstone was the 1956 Celebrations which I did not attend. After that, the unease, which somewhere deep down in me even in those halcyon times I myself felt, came out in the open – particularly in the 1960s. While many of us did respect the superior talents and merits of the students who came from rural or mafassil areas like Mahishadal, Chittagong, Raiganj or Jhargram, they themselves slipped either uneasily or snugly into the metropolitan job markets joining the IPS, IAS or the Calcutta suburban teaching or University international research milieu. I can remember only Prabhuram Khatua, one of my best classmates with an

excellent academic record and a quiet, laidback style, going back to teach in Mahisadal. As the countryside of West Bengal and particularly the mufassil towns stagnated in the 1950s, without any industrial diversification, or even agricultural innovation, the College's elite became more and more metropolitan, focussed on Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay, or began to migrate across the English Channel or the Atlantic Ocean. Many other colleges turned into centres of negative

consciousness, lacking Presidency's resources and heritage, and unable because of lack of mobilisation of endowment funds to compete with Presidency's high endowment of books, space and funds. And by a process of involution, they also lacked Government interest which maintained in Presidency College one elite College in a sea of decay. Mufassil government colleges lost the vitality which some as in Hooghly or Krishnagar had in undivided Bengal.