

First Year in Presidency College

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You suddenly felt tall and big and on your own going by bus to college. You footed it from Grove Lane to the crossing of Hazra and Russa Roads and then took a bus which at rush hour charged a fare of 2 annas to Presidency College and 1½ annas at off hours. The red Walfords were very much there, and it was a joy to ride on top of their open-top double-deckers. Calcutta's air was still clean, or if it really wasn't, there would be no noticeable grime on your clothes at the end of the day, and it was quite exhilarating to feel the wind toss up your hair and brush your cheeks. New hard-top private double-decker buses were coming up bearing romantic or mythical names like Urvasi or Menaka. An apocryphal story on everybody's lips those days was how Heramba Chandra Maitra, Principal of City College and a staunch Brahmo, kept obstinately waiting at a roadside stop for a bus that didn't bear the name of a celestial courtesan.

The massive complex of Presidency College, the large grounds, the Baker Laboratory and Hare School filled me with awe. It had an overpowering effect upon a provincial school boy who had never been to anything

so grand and somehow felt unworthy. I had read quite some of Bengal's cultural and political history since Derozio and there were hardly a dozen names among those who strode that history who had not passed through the portals of this complex. History may be servitude, history may be freedom and I had no notion then what it might mean for me. For one who had just escaped by the skin of his teeth from being sent off to Dufferin to train as a buccaneer (Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum : I was full of authors those days) the college was indeed overwhelming.

First there was the fair sized group in every class who made no bones that they owned Calcutta. They had either been to Hare or the Hindu (across the street) or to the other great schools of the city, or else they came from families of wealth and social status. Second came the General and Divisional Scholars who again could be grouped in two lots : those who were from Calcutta and those that were not. The second had the touch of merit, while the first had the touch of class. Third came the provincial boys who had no way but to move unobtrusively like mice along the corners of the walls as it were. I suspect Hilaire Belloc must have had Presidency College in mind when he wrote :

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The Rich arrived in pairs
And also in Rolls Royces ;
They talked of their affairs
In loud and strident voices,

The Poor arrived in Fords
Whose features they resembled.

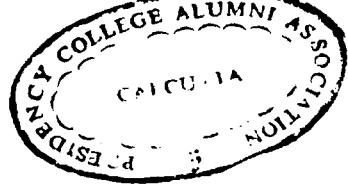
The People in Between
Looked underdone and harassed,
And out of place and mean,
And horribly embarrassed.

I was one of the In Betweens with a ten-rupee district scholarship in my pocket.

I took Intermediate Science which today is 11 and 12 of 1942. Our humanities, maths and chemistry class were held in the main building. We did our physics and physiology at the Baker Laboratory. We did not have semesters but had class exams spaced as in semesters. Each science subject was taken by at least two teachers in a term, of which one would be very senior. Thus in Chemistry we had professor Panchanan Neogy as the senior professor and Dr. Hussain as the junior teacher. Dr. Hussain was the right person for me to light up the imagination. Professor Neogy was a bit too fatherly. Dr. Qudrat-i-khuda looked every inch a savant. So it was in Physiology. Professor S.C. Mahalanobis was the overseeing spirit, while professor Bose and Dr. Banerjee took the theoreticals and practicals. But the most fascinating teacher with a mordant wit who yet took the greatest interest in your growth was Professor Charuchandra Bhattacharya of Physics. He had a sardonic twinkle in his eye but knew what you were up to. He was close to

Rabindranth Tagore and to Visva Bharati, but never paraded his connexion. The main building, the massive Chemistry department and labs notwithstanding, made you feel humble. But the Baker Laboratory with its animal-cages, the geological and physiological labs, the astonishing range of measuring instruments in the physics labs, the impressive physics theatre which, incidentally, served as the cultural centre of the college as well, and above all the pervasive sweet sickly smell of gas from the bunsen burners gave you real self-esteem.

About my professors who went to great lengths to beat a donkey into a horse, as the Amrita Bagar Patrika might say, who would think nothing of wasting Sunday upon whole Sunday giving me lessons all by myself and urging me to improve—the great Prabhulla Chandra Ghosh, Srikumar Banerjee, Taraknath Sen, Apuva Chanda, Subodhichandra Sengupta, Somnath Maitra, Hiran Kumar Banerjee, Susobhan-chandra Sarkar, Prasantachandra Mahalanobis (the last-named after I left college)—I am filled with qualms that I never kept up with them after I left college except with professors



Apurva Chanda, Susobhanchandra Sarkar and Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis. The reason was that right from the end of 1940 I was away in the wilds, 'meting and doling unequal laws unto a savage race'. But I have felt extremely lucky that Professors Chanda, Mahalanobis and Sarkar always found time for me. I feel blessed that I could meet Professor Qudrat-i-khuda at Dacca in 1975. He was quite unwell but still extremely active and concerned. And it is only now that I am fortunate enough to be able occasionally to go and pay my respects to Professor Subodh-Chandra Sengupta. He was the teacher of whom I was more scared than most, because he wrote the leanest prose in impeccable syntax, with as few adjectives and adverbs as possible and on the principle of less is more. Being one of those whose physical presence none would care to write home about, I held several persons in great esteem, not only because they were intellectually so preeminent but also because they were tall, dark and handsome : Taraknath Sen, B. M. Sen, Susobhan Sarkar, Prasanta Mahalanobis and Qudrat-i-khuda were D. Scs and tall, fair and handsome. Were all D. Scs like that, I wondered ? Not Snehamoy Datta, however, another D. Sc., for whom our private code word was Tubby.

Somnath Maitra, famed along with his brothers for handsomeness, gave us tutorials in English in his cubicle inside the Library. He asked me one day where I lived and suggested that since he lived within walking distance he would like me to visit him on Sunday afternoons when the great Pramatha Chaudhuri visited him. I had read **Char-Yari Katha** and suspected from the way he talked that this Somnath might be **Char-Yari's** original. And without a doubt he confirmed it by the affec-

tion he received from the older man the first afternoon I saw Professor Maitra helping Chaudhuri out of his car on to his living room. In 1933 Pramatha Chaudhuri was certainly well past his prime. He tended to mumble but his diction, when you got him, whether he spoke in Bengali, English or French (this last I did not understand) was impeccable. The sheer joy of listening to the two conversing was like hearing cello suite of Bach : how strange that a single instrument should speak with two voices as it were, the older voice providing the figured bass, and the younger elaborating in reedy notes the musical theme.

Principal B. M. Sen, the great mathematician, was so shy that he would blush before bringing himself to admonish first year fools. But Mrs. Sen was made of sterner stuff and decided that this was no way to govern. Indeed we would not know how the different associations and Parishads would have run without her. It was she who always took charge of the college dramatics and kept the unrulies like Bikash Roy in their place. It was she again who held Bidyut Ghosh, Chandlai Mehta and others in leash when it came to athletics, sports and sterner trips. Only once did we find her in high dudgeon. The ungrateful wretches, Bidyut and Bikash, had left her high and dry waiting in the wings of the stage to be thanked after a very successful play at the University Institute Hall. Next day she had it out on them with a sound lash of the tongue : I, I who ignore even a' tack of the heart to rejoice in your success, how dare you run on ?

Nobody that I know of ever dared thereafter.

I cannot think which year it was, the first or the second, in College, but let me set it

down here for what it is worth. It was close of hours one late afternoon and the formidable Professor P.C. Ghosh with his 20 Kilo gladstone bag was at the head of the grand staircase about to descend while discoursing on some ambiguous Shakespearean passage to his fourth-year disciples, at the end of a class that had gone on for hours. He had scarcely descended two or three steps (we were at a very respectful distance on the corridor at the top) when he suddenly stopped talking. He was looking down intently on something at the far end of the bottom corridor. We stopped too wherever we were and wondered. Suddenly we saw his massive thickset bull like frame arch and quiver like a toro's about to charge at a toreador in the bull ring. The unsuspecting toreador down below at the far end was none other than a smart young thing smoking a cigarette with its tip glowing red. Suddenly there was an

earth tremor and before we knew we saw Professor Ghosh rushing headlong down the stairs still clinging to his gladstone bag shouting 'drop it, drop it at once' at the offending young man. For quite a full second the latter stood dazed and uncomprehending. It was now time for wisdom to dawn and he took to his heels as fast as he could. We were greatly worried over Professor Ghosh as he coasted downhill at great speed heedless of his own safety. (He would be around 45, I guess, and people of 45 those days looked like people of 60/65 today). The young man could scarcely believe that he would be so relentlessly pursued and looked over his shoulder from time to time until he ran out of the main gate and across College Street toward Hindu School, with professor Ghosh stopping at the gate still shouting at him and promising to drive him out of Calcutta.

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