

Future of The Presidency College

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In the inaugural address given on the occasion of the Centenary celebration of the Presidency College, Acharya Jadunath Sarkar had remarked,

“The first and foremost pressing question of to-day is how to maintain the proper standard in our teaching and examinations; Gresham’s Law is operating in the academic world, bad coins are driving good coins out of our market. In the name of local autonomy Free India is being covered by mushroom universities—without money, without men and without that catholicity of mind which is the root meaning of the word university.”

“In the name of democracy these universities are running a race for cheaper degrees. At the same time in a narrow parochial spirit they are engaging only local men as teachers and not the ablest available for the pay.”

“In the past century, Presidency College had often fought a lone battle, by the precept of its teachers and the example of its students, in defence of the highest academic standard. In the coming century they cannot escape that very unpopular duty if India is not to lapse into medieval darkness.”

While not subscribing to all that Dr. Jadunath Sarkar has said about “Free India being covered with mushroom universities ... and the need of the Presidency College to fight a lone battle ... in defence of the highest academic standards etc.”, the writer proposes to discuss in the present article the

situation which is being created by the very rapid rate of increase in the number of persons seeking to obtain the benefit of collegiate education in this country and how the Presidency College can assist in canalising this demand so that within its available resources, the institution may continue to provide, by the precepts of its teachers and the examples of its students, the highest academic training to its alumni consonant with its past traditions.

In the University Grants Commission’s report for the year 1958-59 attention is drawn to the present rapid increase, at the rate of 50,000 a year, of students in universities and colleges. The number was estimated to be 8.50 lakhs in 1958-59 and soon it will be 10 lakhs. This rapid rate of growth in university population, India shares with other big countries like the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. where the ideal of the state providing educational facilities to all citizens of suitable age-groups from the primary to the highest stages is accepted. In these countries there are however some safeguards, namely, at the university stage some machinery is provided by which only those who can benefit by the training provided will be selected either at the entrance stage or will be allowed to continue to the higher stages.

After discussing the advantages or otherwise of a residential unitary type of university containing not more than 5,000 students, as recommended by successive university commissions, the UGC has drawn attention to the many difficulties financial, administrative, as well as disciplinary, which hamper the carrying out of such a programme for the whole of India.

The tentative solution proposed by the UGC is to have teaching and affiliating universities which bring under their jurisdiction a large number of scattered colleges in wide and predominantly rural areas. Under the present condition of study, increase in student population will necessitate the setting up of new colleges "When the number of students in the colleges affiliated to a university increase, making administration and conduct of examination difficult, it would be then necessary to break up such an affiliating university into two or more manageable ones. At the same time it is desirable for every affiliating university to have a strong teaching core at its head quarters or at the proper stage in other important centres."

This suggestion of the UGC we find has been implemented in the recently passed, Behar University Act; four teaching cum affiliating universities—at Patna, Ranchi, Muzaffarpur and Bhagalpur have been set up. One consequence of this Act is that the present teaching and residential university at Patna will become another teaching cum affiliating university; this change of status of the University has been strongly condemned by many of the distinguished alumni of the old Patna University.

In West Bengal, where the largest number of students at the University entrance stage is concentrated in the metropolitan area of Calcutta, the tendency has been to found both unitary but not residential type of universities at Jadavpur within the Calcutta metropolitan area and at Kalyani; also at Burdwan, a teaching cum affiliating university has been established. At the same time, a large number of Government sponsored Colleges are being opened within the affiliating jurisdiction of the Calcutta University. The total number of students in the affiliated colleges under the Calcutta University has not been much affected by these changes. In midst of all this confusion, we are losing sight of the fact, that the essential functions of a University, conservation of knowledge, its diffusion by teaching and its advancement

by research, are possible mainly in institutions where a tradition has grown up which can command the respect of its alumni. Acceptance of such tradition does not imply a blind obedience to what has come down from the past, but an acceptance of the way in which similar situations have been met and solved in the past. Recently, the Committee on Science and Freedom in England has brought out a number of pamphlets on the problem of freedom and autonomy in universities all over the world, including some countries in Asia and Africa, where University education has recently felt the impact of modern western cultures. The editors write, "Tradition is the mainstay of the University's claim to freedom and autonomy. The record of struggle and achievement in the search for knowledge and the respect which University scholars and institutions have gained in the past centuries are thus best advocate against encroachment from outside."

The Government of West Bengal in dealing with the problem of founding new universities in the State to cope with the increasing growth of entrants for higher education, has recognized the necessity of founding within the metropolitan area of Calcutta a unitary teaching university, by granting university status to the group of institutions which were started in 1906 under the aegis of the National Council of Education, and is now recognized as the Jadavpur University. These institutions during their chequered career have tried from the beginning to safeguard their autonomy and freedom. Probably the acute financial handicaps under which they had to struggle did not permit them to discharge satisfactorily their academic responsibilities. Under the new set up, aided by substantial grants from the State Government and the University Grants Commission, the new university is experimenting with new types of general education preliminary to specialists, courses at the final stage. The student teacher ratio is reasonable and we look forward to the new University developing its tradition of teaching and research

based upon its hard won tradition of freedom and autonomy.

Returning to our main topic, the future of the Presidency College, the following extract is quoted from an article contributed by the writer to Science and Culture (22, Feb. 1957) on "Scientific Education and Research in the Calcutta University during the last one hundred years."

"Science teaching and research during the period 1875-1900: During this period the University had not taken up any responsibility for science teaching and research, which were entrusted to the affiliated colleges. Of these the most important one was the Presidency College which was at that time considered not only to be the best in the Presidency of Bengal, but also according to some in the whole of India. This college specialized in honours as well as in post-graduate teaching. It had, till the Calcutta University undertook to provide for teaching and research at the post-graduate stage, served the function of a University College. Many of the large provincial universities in England, like those in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Newcastle etc. started as University Colleges; these later obtained recognition as universities. Calcutta with its increasing university student population, is becoming too large to be managed by a single university. Last year the institutions under the National Council of Education, have been consolidated into the teaching University of Jadavpur. We hope that at a not very distant future the Presidency College will be converted into a similar teaching university."

The tradition nurtured in the Presidency College had its beginning with the foundation of the Hindu College in 1817; it took shape from the controversy between the two schools of thought, the anglicist and the orientalist, regarding the educational policy

to be adopted by the East India Company, which had by then become the virtual rulers of the parts of India under their sphere of influence. As with the other liberating movements of the period, Rammohan Roy was one of the inspirer of the anglicist movement. A Committee was at this time formed to raise funds "for the establishment of an academy that would impart to India the *new learning of Europe* and would set before it the task of imparting instructions in English literature and modern science and philosophy."

Like other alumni of the Presidency College, the present writer is grateful to the editors of the Presidency College Centenary volume, for giving such a vivid account of the achievements of the teachers and students of the College since its original foundation in 1817 as Hindu College. In the gallery of portraits contained in the book, we find the portrait, of Rammohan Roy and H.H. Wilson amongst the benefactors, and amongst its eminent teachers we find amongst others the portraits of Derozio, Captain Richardson, Sutcliffe, Pearycharan Sarkar, Guroodas Banerjee, Prasanna Kumar Sarbadhikary, Charles H. Tawney, Alexander Pedler, H. M. Percival, Jagadis Chandra Bose, Prasanna Kumar Ray, Prafulla Chandra Ray, Benoyendranath Sen, Manmohan Ghosh, H. R. James, S. C. Mahalanobis, Harinath De, C. E. Cullis, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, Surendranath Das Gupta, and to which we may add the names of Bhupati Mohan Sen and Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis. These eminent teachers had by their teaching, by their character and research, contributed to the growth of the tradition associated with the Presidency College; they were the pioneers in the acclimatization in this province of the *new learning* which grew up from the western impact.

It is not possible for me to adequately deal with the many-sided contributions made by the alumni of the College to the growth of our national culture. I will however, mention briefly the outstanding contributions made by the science alumni of the Presidency

College who were recruited by Dr. Ashutosh Mukherjee for the newly opened University College of Science and Technology. The following extract is taken from my previously quoted article:

"The foundation of the University College of Science specially provided opportunities to a batch of brilliant young men to strike out along different branches of investigations and achieve distinctions in them. They all graduated from the Presidency College, and but for the opportunity given to them in the Science College, their talents would have been either frustrated or diverted to other channels. Many of them like M. N. Saha, J. C. Ghosh, J. N. Mukherjee, S. K. Mitra, S. K. Banerjee, S. N. Bose, G. S. Bose, P. N. Ghosh, P. Ray passed through adolescence at the time of the swadeshi movement and were attracted to a life of research partly by their aversion to entering the government services and partly by the pioneering scientific researches of J. C. Bose and P. C. Ray. The achievements of the staff attached to the Physics and Chemistry Departments were specially outstanding. Raman obtained his F.R.S. for his investigations on light scattering, the Nobel prize for discovering the Raman effect. M. N. Saha received his F.R.S. in recognition of his theory of thermal ionisation in stellar atmosphere. S. N. Bose achieved fame as co-author of the Bose-Einstein statistics; S. K. Mitra pioneered researches on the upper atmosphere in this country. He is the author of a standard book on the subject; J. N. Mukherjee's work on surface charges on colloids and J. C. Ghosh's theory of complete ionisation in strong electrolytes, received considerable attention at the time of their publications. P. Ray has continued the tradition of P. C. Ray by his investigations in inorganic chemistry."

Since the taking over of the post-graduate teaching in Arts and Science by the Calcutta University, the virtual monopoly of post-graduate teaching so long enjoyed by the Presidency College has ceased. For a time the College ceased to attract outstanding teachers and students at the post-graduate level. After a period of hesitation and indecision, I am glad to notice that a new effort is being made by the Education Directorate, West Bengal, to provide adequate facilities for research to the Presidency College staff and to attract some of the most successful products of the School Final examinations.

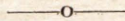
There is however a danger that unless special efforts are made to revitalise in some new way to suit the present conditions, the pioneering spirit of distinguished founders and teachers, the inherited tradition of the Presidency College is in danger of obliteration. Colleges, now affiliated to the Calcutta University are liable to be converted into institutions for mass production of graduates. The present practice of setting questions based on written syllabi by external examiners, and the assessment of the merits of the examinee solely on written scripts, with no possibility of ascertaining their performance during the College years, makes it more and more difficult to separate the outstanding from the mediocre, and to provide special opportunities to the former for fully developing their intrinsic talents.

For this reason and for others which I discuss later, I would welcome the idea of the Presidency College being converted to unitary teaching university, with freedom to experiment on methods of teaching, to make alterations in the syllabi to suit the changing demands for specialized training and to assess the performance of the students from class records and periodic tests. Should funds permit small hostel may be erected in the newly opened Manicktala area, in each of which students of humanities and science from the freshmen to the post-graduate level may live together and thereby help to enrich one another's outlook and personality.

We are living in an age where there is an increasing demand for specialists in science and technology and in some humanistic disciplines. The danger of over specialisation from early years, commencing from the upper classes of the multipurpose secondary schools, is creating what C. P. Snow calls two cultures, in which the ways of thinking of the two groups become more and more alienated from each other. I do not know how far this is true of our present state of higher education. Two ways have been suggested for overcoming such estrangement in outlook amongst the intellectual elites; one is to provide general courses of studies in the early college years which will include some essential elements of humanistic and scientific disciplines. The other way is to provide small residential hostels and to ensure that in each of them students from the two disciplines, freshmen and senior, should stay

together. Much of our education during student days in subjects which lie outside our special lines of study could be obtained from contacts which living together in small hostels can provide.

The Presidency College has so far been more or less under the control of the Education Directorate. Such control was probably necessary in the early stages of the College, otherwise it would not have been possible to recruit the outstanding teachers from at home and abroad. This has helped in creating the traditions of its high academic standard. The academic tradition having been established, the time has come that such tradition may be allowed to flower in an atmosphere of freedom and autonomy. It is not my purpose here to discuss how such change over could be made.



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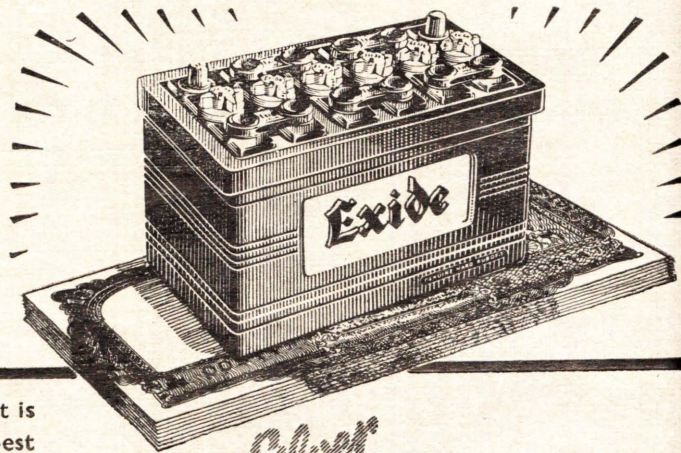
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