

Living History

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I entered the hallowed portals of Presidency College in 1972, in awe of its history, its heritage, its luminaries, its famous teachers and its contribution to society at large. So much so that it was at times easy to forget that it was primarily a center of excellence for undergraduate teaching. It was actually much more. The department of Economics that I joined was a UGC supported Center for Economic Studies, the Statistics department had the distinction of having given birth to the Indian Statistical Institute, the Physics and Chemistry departments were at the cutting edge of knowledge in the pure sciences. The History and English departments not only had some of the great teachers of the time but the prettiest and trendiest crowd on campus. It was a heady mix of a great student life and experience of a society in transition.

The maelstrom of the late sixties (1968-71) was behind us and we happily immersed ourselves into the enjoyment of life as normal undergrads. The lessons of the chaotic sixties were perhaps subconsciously absorbed and the majority concentrated on activities that normal undergraduate students should be doing – concentrating on studies, on fragile relationships, sports, music and the important business of growing up and

getting educated. The big man on campus was no longer the leftist idealist trying to bring in social change through armed struggle. The events of the sixties, in fact, had the effect of keeping students away from active politics on campus during our time. Students had their political views and these were debated and discussed, but engaging in active politics had been relegated to a fringe activity even though political parties had been trying to exert control from outside. The political honchos were not in control of student life at Presidency, a situation that would change for the worse years later. This was also the time that the Presidency cultural festival 'Melee' was introduced.

While the student body reflected society at large, there was change in the air. Figure hugging jeans and T-shirts were to be seen more often and Dylan and Floyd could be heard in the portico, corridors and canteen, though this segment was not in the majority. The surprising thing was that the Westernized and the traditional were not at odds with each other but wonderfully interacted and felt comfortable with each other. It said something about the liberal atmosphere on the campus, which, like it or not, was definitely elitist, not in terms of the social background that students came from, but intellectually. It is this

base of good students coming together to meet a great body of teachers that set Presidency apart. It led to a cross-fertilization of ideas and, as a result, it avoided the 'one-dimensional' syndrome with which we might label many of the engineering students that come out of India's institutes today.

My thinking is that it is through a happy coincidence rather than planned institutional design that some outstanding academics and teachers had come together at Presidency in those days. Many had international experience and passed on their values to us. Sukanta Chaudhuri returned from Oxford University in 1973 and began teaching at the department of English. At the Department of Economics, Amiya Bagchi was from the University of Cambridge. Dipak Banerjee was from the University of California at Berkeley and they passed on their eclectic values to us – pushing us towards heightened curiosity and intellectual exploration. Amartya Sen used to visit his *alma mater* often and we were the beneficiaries of excellent visiting professors from other universities in India and abroad. Importantly, unlike some other places of higher learning, ideology of any kind was not imposed, subtly or directly. We were well aware of Professor Bagchi's leanings toward the Left, but he never had a one sided approach. We were informed of the alternatives and urged to reason it out for ourselves.

That many of them did not think much of the antiquated course structure of Calcutta University was obvious. One day, at a first year macro economics class, Dipak Banerjee urged

us to learn the principles and concepts of economics and not restrict ourselves to the syllabus of Calcutta University. So we were gently encouraged to travel well beyond the textbooks and syllabus, into contemporary research papers and think conceptually and solve problems. The bane of an Indian education – learning by rote, was conspicuous by its absence. The rigid structure of the Calcutta University syllabus had to be taken in our stride, as we could do little to change it. Unlike many other colleges, at Presidency the study of mathematics was

of the Presidency Debating and Quiz teams, or romping off to Khajuraho on field trips with the History department, there were some negatives that could not be wished away.

The maintenance of infrastructure within the college was appalling. Though many like to romanticize Promodeda's canteen, it was like a roadside dhaba and not fit for a college like Presidency. A visit to the student cafes at St. Stephens, the Delhi School of Economics, the Physics cafeteria at Delhi University, if not to

and center for excellence 'halls of residence' must uniformly be of a high standard. This is a basic requirement for universities world-wide. Universities in Bengal do not seem to realize this. Perhaps a visit to the Halls of Residence at Delhi University or JNU will show what minimum standards should be.

Over the years, the illegal bookshops outside the college gates have been romanticized. They hide the façade of the wonderful main building, the statue and make it look like some slum area, definitely unfit for the campus of Presidency University. Just as productivity improves at a well lit and refurbished office or work place, well designed and better infrastructure will have a positive influence on students and teachers alike and a wonderful opportunity has presented itself now. The new university should deviate from the old approach of the PWD and embrace contemporary practice in developing infrastructure – both physical and digital.

compulsory for all students taking Honours in Economics. However, we had to study the subject with fellow students from the Physics department for whom the syllabus had been originally structured. Thus, as students of Economics it was compulsory for us to learn the mathematics of astronomy, but not some of the mathematics that is relevant to applications of Economics. It will now be easier for Presidency University to structure its own courses and pedagogy than in our days.

While we enjoyed life on College Street, with endless discussions at the Coffee House, visits to Putiram, playing for the college cricket team, following the domination

the universities of the West, would show what undergraduate students experience elsewhere, even in state run institutions. The cafeterias elsewhere were also great places for interaction between teachers and students and segregating them is not a very good idea. In our days one entered the toilettes of the college at one's own risk, they were so unhygienic and unclean. It perhaps reflected our society's nature to keep things clean and hygienic within our homes, but dangerously unclean outside.

The Hindu Hostel has no standard to talk about. The living and hygienic standards are no better than slums. For a 'university'

the ideological mask for a political design. It was the party's way of infiltrating the middle classes and exercising social control.

This was the beginning of a sorry decline of Presidency in recent years saved only by its recent transformation to the status of a university. The ruling party wanted Presidency to become like the lowest common denominator – be like every other mediocre state college. The easiest way to achieve this was through transfer of like-minded teachers from places which are not known for academic excellence into Presidency, and not to invest in infrastructure. It worked. The party machine and its ideology managed to systematically destroy the excellence that Presidency stood for.

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The job at hand now is to reverse this process. While it would not be an easy task, the university must do its utmost to stamp out party politics from campus and bring in the free flowing shared intellectual atmosphere of old.

It must aspire to be far more than what the old college used to be. This obviously means that greater resources would be required. My friend and contemporary Chiranjit Banerjee points out that Presidency has not been known to mint millionaires, much less billionaires who can contribute as alumni.

The college has leant very heavily on government largesse and, as

long as the college does that, there would be a yawning mismatch between lofty aspirations and progress on the ground. We studied at Presidency nearly 'free of cost'. Those days are over. Those who become used to heavily subsidized education rarely want to change, as depicted by recent student protests in Montreal or in Britain. Obviously this attitude would need to change. Other models are available for funding the development of Presidency University.

Fund raising could come from a combination of Corporate partnerships, government support (though without total reliance), private endowments/benefactors, alumni contributions, targeted fundraising programs, professional fund management

and returns from investment and contributions from parents of enrolled students on voluntary basis.

Not everyone will be able to afford higher fees, hence there would be a need for merit and need-based scholarships as well as loan programs. Most people are unaware that there are existing student loan programs from banks like SBI which are generous and can be repaid over the very long term when one starts earning. I am sure, the mentor group and university administration have ideas on how to go about this. But, managing a college and a modern university require different skill sets and professional advice

should be sought for going forward.

Presidency has traditionally placed great emphasis on and has always honoured its academic luminaries who have made their mark in the academic profession. I think the new university needs to draw significantly from the experience of its alumni from all walks of life as their significant successes go unrecognized.

There is a view that in the past Presidencians have remained in academics, become journalists or bureaucrats and there are hardly any names to talk about in the corporate world, business and other fields, where possibly our friends from St. Xavier's College or St. Stephen's have had greater impact.

The argument against this view is that we should not expect an educational institution like Presidency, or any other undergraduate college of its kind who are part of a University with its own curriculum, to impart special training to its students to become captains of commerce.

The purpose of education is to educate and, in the process, to develop the ability to think on one's own and act as good citizens and that is preparing for life. The rest must be left to individuals their inclinations and abilities. Presidency has traditionally produced people for more cerebral activities than purely vocational pursuits. My guess is that the number of Presidencians who have done their PhDs or done other specialist qualifications after post-graduation is relatively higher than most other undergraduate colleges in India.

Also, the path that one takes depends on the subject that you choose and one's inclination. If one has done History or English in college, chances are that you will find them in the world of journalism, advertising, teaching or authorship. Chitra Banerjee

abroad. The world of 'hi-tech' and Information Technology is full of successful Presidencians. Many of my colleagues, who are not professors, can be found in the IMF and World Bank. There is a huge amount of diversity that is probably unmatched elsewhere.

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Divakarune (Mistress of Spices etc) was my contemporary at Presidency in the English Department and she gets a million dollar advance for every book that she writes, other than showing a great deal of compassion in the charitable and social work that she does. Anita Mehta my contemporary (Physics) was awarded and recognized as India's leading female physicist and is in high demand across the research world. Even here in Kuwait – where I currently work – there are a number of Presidencians in the Energy (Oil and Gas) sector who are originally from the Geology department of Presidency and who honed their skills with corporations like ONGC.

I know of many who have excelled and are very successful in the legal and financial worlds in India and

This does not take us away from the fact that the old Presidency College did not have a tradition of recognizing the contributions of its non-academic stars and acknowledged success only in the narrow field of academics with academics judging other academics. Success in the rough and tumble of the real world continues to be overlooked. Going forward, the college has to recognize this and the new university would do well to chart a new course. It will give it the opportunity to draw from the collective expertise of its illustrious alumni who have excelled in building institutions and much more.

Here are some more luminaries from non-academic fields including the corporate world and there are many more – S M

Datta, CMD of Hindustan Lever, Arun C Mukherjee, ex-Chairman of LIC, D N Ghosh, ex-Chairman SBI, Philips and L&T during the eighties and nineties, the late Supriya Gupta, founder CMD of Axis Bank (then UTI Bank) etc. Datta and Ghosh continue to be very famous men in business circles and continue to chair many leading companies in a non-executive capacity. D N Ghosh has written many books, the latest being "Business and Polity" where he sweeps economic history of the world for the last three millennia and offers an interesting thesis.

Through these examples, I can make a generalization. Whatever the field of one's choice, Presidencians have never curbed their intellectual curiosity throughout their lives and gone beyond mere vocational excellence. However, the achievements and greatness of its teachers and its alumni have been much too individualistic and there is a significant gap in an institutionalized set of traditions. It is this that the new Presidency University needs to build as it becomes a center of excellence once again, only this time, pitched much higher.

Alumnus (Economics/1972-75)