

Looking Back at the Sixties: Tale Told by an Absolute Nobody

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True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy, Romeo
and Juliet, Act 1, Scene 4

Anyone belonging to my generation, when asked to conjure up his version of the Presidency tale, cannot help feeling a bit like the Ancient Mariner in Coleridge's "Rime". The college that I attended and the age it represented have been washed away by the tides of time. Half forgotten memories cling nevertheless like albatrosses around the necks of some of us. It is a punishment that can be awarded only to people who have shamelessly outlived their allotted time in "this breathing world".

The shame of over-extension does not visit those, of course, who had not only been a part of that "age of fables", but continue to live on even today in supreme glory, and rightfully so, having joined possibly the ranks of the immortal. Almost surely, Amartya Sen leads the chosen few, accompanied by stars such as the geologist Asish Ranjan Basu, physicist Bikash Sinha and several others. Nonetheless, being admitted to Presidency College following the school board examinations endowed every student without exception during that age with an aura of greatness. Middle class parents took pride in announcing that their children were the chosen ones and their less fortunate neighbours invariably envied them.

As I remember, following what used to be known as the School Final Examination, I had walked through the gates of the college for the first time with "bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness", to start off as a student of the Intermediate of Science (ISc) class. Admission was inextricably linked to the aggregate score secured in the School Final Examination. I should have been surprised and possibly filled with jubilation to locate my name in the first list of the successful admission seekers. At the very top of the list shone those who had achieved a rank in the board examination. First, second, third and so on as the list travelled all the way down in order of mark-wise merit. My name appeared somewhere near the very bottom, belonging as I did to the group that had also run, though I doubt that I ever tried seriously to participate in the "also ran" race. I had probably managed to simply limp along at best, a habit that I have failed to kick till this very day.

I maintained a respectful distance from the medalists, once classes began. The champions were strewn across the classroom glowing in celestial glory, while a large number of us hoped to escape notice. I recall professors, one in particular, who on the very first day that he saw us, ordered us to declare our scores, not sotto voce but loudly and clearly. Those who revealed monumental scores were further investigated. "What was your rank?" The answer could be a stunning "Third" or a

"fourth". But the likes of me were not spared on that account. Our desperate prayers to be granted invisibility having been ignored by the powers in Heaven, we too had to own up to our rank-denied ignominy. The classrooms might have resembled cauldrons of class struggle on such occasions, being filled up by two sorts of students, the Prince Hamlets and the crowd of "attendant lords".

Whatever the perceptions of the world outside might have been, within the college boundaries, class distinctions existed. Only a handful of students were assumed to be the heirs apparent to thrones of glory, with the majority resembling strangers à la Camus. Of course, fate decreed that many a throne had to be abdicated in the course of time, sometimes wilfully, sometimes in battlefields. The anonymous beginners often transformed into celebrities and the hastily anointed ones disappeared into the wilderness with equal frequency.

Volumes have been written about the goings on within the college premises, about professors whose names will stand carved in stone for the rest of eternity. Since the high and mighty have already sung paeans in their praise, I can succeed, if at all, in adding minuscule footnotes to them. I will try and perform that holy duty at some point or the other in this essay. However, what attracted me more to start with were the environs of the Presidency College of yore. The clock in the clock tower, next to the observatory in the main building, if memory serves me right, never worked, so that recorded time appeared to have remained frozen throughout the entire period of my student day association with the college. The Derozio Hall did not exist, though we had been promised by Sanat Bose, the then Principal, that funds for the auditorium had been sanctioned. He warned us with deadly precision, though, that it was not likely to come up in the foreseeable future. There being no auditorium in the college, most cultural programmes organised by the Students' Union

were held in the Physics Lecture Theatre in Baker Laboratory building. This is where we were charmed by Debabrata Biswas, Purabi Mukhopadhyay and many other renowned singers.

This Lecture Theatre, which continues to exist, was also the venue for public debates organised by students and the most popular and unbelievably talented debater I was fortunate enough to witness performing there was Sudhangsu Dasgupta. Hiranmoy Karlekar, who was himself a student of Presidency College, was also an impressive debater. In all likelihood, around the time I heard him debate, he was a post-graduate student. Gayatri Chakravarty (later Spivak), along with Jayabrata Bhattacharjee (who was a year junior to me) and a much younger Sundar Chatterjee (later known as film actor Dhritiman Chatterjee) regaled us with their debating skills too.

The best of the debates that we were exposed to in the Physics Lecture Theatre were organised in the form of "Mock Parliament" and the issue that was debated by this Parliament was the dismissal of the democratically elected communist government of E.M.S. Namboodiripad in Kerala. The dismissal took place on 31 July, 1959. It was my first year at Presidency College and I have no clear idea about the exact date of the debate. Eminent politicians such as Siddhartha Sankar Ray and Sadhan Gupta, as well as regular debaters like Sudhangsu Dasgupta and N. Viswanathan participated in the debate. Snila Kumar Mukherjee, who had been the Speaker of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly from 1952 through 1957 acted as the Speaker for the Mock Parliament too.

It was one of the grandest of shows I witnessed during my student life and I simply cannot forget the oratorical skills that our young minds were exposed to on that afternoon. The students were thrilled and I think that the motion was thrown open to vote, but I do

not remember which side won on that lovely autumn afternoon. It's quite possible that the Treasury benches won, since the Students' Union at the time had an SFI minority and the group that dominated students' affairs was the anti-SFI group PCSU (Presidency College Students' Union).

Students presented musical performances too on occasions and one in particular that has remained glued to my mind was Partha Ghose's singing with a piano accordion that he played himself. Most probably, he was then a student of the final year of the Physics Honours course and I was a year junior to him, studying Economics. It is difficult to come up with a list of the numbers he presented, but I distinctly remember him singing Kishore Kumar's unforgettable song "shing nei tobu nam tar shingho ..." He achieved instant popularity in college by his performance and I was told that many of the girls who attended his show fell in love with him. And why not? He was handsome, he was a talented singer and he was an accomplished student.

There was yet another venue for an annual gathering, the Star Theatre in North Calcutta. Students used to stage all boys or girls plays there, since university rules strictly forbade boys and girls performing together. The girls normally performed Tagore dance dramas, such as Chitrangada or Shyama. Boys restricted themselves to plays like Sukumar Ray's Chalachchitto Chanchori. Dwijen Bagchi, a lawyer in later life, was an accomplished actor. He excelled in these shows. Normally English language performances were avoided. During my student days though, English plays were staged for two consecutive years. The one I participated in had a female character in it, which was doctored upon, changing it from someone or the other's wife to his brother.

Students spoke to one another mostly in Bengali, avoiding English as far as possible. The

atmosphere was typically Bengali middle-class. However, a cultural revolution of sorts occurred during the year I joined the BA programme in 1961. A significantly large number of students joined the college who had a Loreto College or a St. Xavier's College background. Most of them were fluent in English and opted for what was called Alternative English for the BA Pass course instead of Bengali. It took a while for the college to get accustomed to this new breed of students, but they were quite friendly and those who wished to associate with them were soon part of the group. The revolutionaries were led by a group of girls who had arrived from Loreto College. They brought a metamorphosis in the college premises, sartorially speaking. Prior to their arrival, the girls who studied in the college showed up in simple cotton saree. The Loreto girls arrived in tight fitting salwar-kurtas and their kurtas, unthinkably enough, were often sleeveless. And there was a girl, who, if I remember correctly, arrived one day in a skirt. That was a bombshell. There was a murmur of disapproval, which could have, I am not entirely sure, reached the Teachers' Room as well. But pretty girls in pretty dresses were pretty girls in pretty dresses and they won hands down. I am still in touch with some of these revolutionaries and they are no different from any other average Bengali person. In any case, middle class or not, they did precipitate a change and apparel-wise at least, the girls transformed the Presidency look from that year.

The quadrangle next to the Baker Laboratory was a quintessential green, maintained in that state along with rows of the best seasonal flowers under the loving care of the Principal. A person entering the college for the first time was invariably caught by the breathtaking beauty of the garden and the bright green field. The maintenance did not extend to many of the other essential facilities, but this oversight was a part of middle class culture as well and no one ever demurred over such issues. One

assumes, though, that the Principal's office and the Teachers' Rooms were adequately equipped to attend to nature's calls.

The green quadrangle was where Dipak Ghosh excelled. He was a talented cricketer and students crowded to watch him produce over-boundaries, one after another, during matches played against other colleges. St Xavier's College was our principal opponent and when they came to play at the Baker quadrangle, all the students forgot about their classes. The Xaverians' principal target was Dipak Ghosh and their joy knew no bounds once Ghosh was dismissed. However, was difficult to put a stop to his magic, which does not mean of course that he never fell prey to the opponents' attack. On one occasion, I remember him being sent back to the pavilion by the captain of the St. Xavier's team, Shivaji Roy I think, who caught Ghosh in the slips. Among Dipak's many cricketing achievements was the number of glass windows in the Baker Laboratory Building that his boundaries managed to smash into splinters.

Yet another accomplished cricketer was Bikash Sinha, whom I have mentioned earlier. However, there was a fundamental difference between the likes of him or Partha Ghose and Dipak Ghosh. Sinha and Ghose were successful students as well, which Ghosh was not. He was a student of the Mathematics Honours course, but I doubt that he ever attended classes. I do not think he managed to complete his degree at all. On days that had no cricket matches scheduled, he sat in the Coffee House in Albert Hall, chain smoking in a quiet corner, mostly alone. What his problem was, I never found out. He came from a well-to-do family I was told that lived in a two storied bungalow near the Gariahat crossing. And one day, without notice, he died. Some told me that his family had a history of premature deaths, but I didn't know him sufficiently well to know the details. A pall of gloom descended on the college on that ill fated day, students speaking in whispers, but soon enough life was back to normal.

I normally caught the No. 10 bus at Gariahat crossing to reach College Street. These were double decker buses, pretty crowded while boarding, but on lucky days the boys found empty seats. On exceptionally lucky days, there would be a girl from college and one could sit next to her. Being able to pay for her ticket (ten paise probably) was bliss. Outside academics, it was the ultimate achievement one could hope for. There was a longer route as well from College Street to Gariahat. This was the No. 2 or 2B bus route, the preferred route if accompanied by a girl.

The college was bordered on its southern fringe by the Calcutta University campus, as Presidency University still is. What has disappeared, though, is the grand Senate Hall with its Corinthian pillars. The Senate Hall directly faced Goldighi in College Square and many an idle afternoon was spent in College Square munching peanuts. Beyond the eastern boundaries of College Square stood the Paramount "sherbet" restaurant (along with its competitor Paragon, which no longer exists). We partook of the excellent elixir they served on days when our meagre allowances permitted the extravagance. What we drank there left us in a tongue licking state for days on end.

On the southern border of College Square stood Puntiram Sweets, which we visited on poorer days to consume a variety of snacks. The northern boundary of the college was flanked by the YMCA building, which housed a small restaurant and this too we visited once in a while. Beyond YMCA, across Harrison Road was Dwarik Ghosh's renowned eatery, which sold mouth watering "luchi" and "aloor dam" for 6 paise and "luchi" and "chholar dal" for 4 on our financially stressed days. There was yet another restaurant on Harrison Road, Gyan Babur Cabin, which directly faced Bankim Chatterjee Street. I don't think too many students from college went there, but thanks to a magnanimous cousin, I did get to taste one of

its delicacies one afternoon. The dish carried a name as exotic as "Kiss Me Quick". Gyan Babur Cabin rests now in peace one knows not where, an event which could well have motivated my cousin to migrate to Australia.

College Street Coffee House of course occupied the pride of place. It was the most patronised restaurant. It was somewhat expensive, quite apart from being smoke filled. Chairs were often hard to find and there were invariably days when one could afford to consume nothing other than the smoke and the intellect stimulating conversations carried out by people sharing the table, or, at best, the cheapest fare it served. This last was known as "infusion" and looked like black coffee. One hears a great deal about Coffee House being the most authentic producer of bales of Bengal's intellectual fabric. But I have to admit that the only thing that ever attracted me to that restaurant was its Mutton Afghani. I visited the place a few years ago only to discover to my horror that Mutton Afghani still existed, but it did so in a hopelessly depreciated state.

College Street itself may have grown more congested compared to those days, but even if it has done so, this is not too apparent. It was always bursting at the seams, and it is difficult to imagine that the seams have actually given way. Of course, the one way traffic arrangement is a modern day phenomenon, but it is hard to distinguish the one way flow from the two way flow of the past.

I was a regular student of Presidency College from 1959 through 1963. I completed my BA degree in Economics in 1963, but remained enrolled as a student till 1965, though I was attending classes in Kantakal at the time as a post-graduate student. An arrangement between Presidency College and Calcutta University those days made it possible for Masters' students to be enrolled as students of Presidency College, primarily to let them have

access to the College library. Taking this into account, I think I can declare myself to have been officially a student of Presidency College for six years.

As I said, I had started off as a student of the Intermediate of Science (ISc) class, after finishing what was known as the School Final Examination. What are my memories from the ISc class? Not much alas that is worth recording. Few teachers in the science stream managed to leave any deep impression. And this has little to do with the passage of time, for I have fascinating memories of teachers who taught me in school. I have recorded those memories elsewhere.

However, One teacher in the ISc class stood out. This was P.C. Rakshit. His classes were full of drama, drama that easily attracted young minds. He taught us physical chemistry and I recall the manner in which he distinguished a physical mixture from a chemical compound. A physical compound, he said, was a bit like a "muri-mudki" mix. Even after mixing them up, it was not difficult to un-mix them into their component parts, simply by physically separating out the two components. The mixtures that doctors prescribed those days and compounders served were therefore not physical compounds from a chemist's point of view.

Another fascinating incident that I remember from this class was the experiment he carried out to show how water could be produced by fusing two molecules of hydrogen with one molecule of oxygen. I was much impressed by the sound and fury accompanying the experiment. When the experiment was completed, we saw a clear glass dome sprinkled with water drops. If I remember correctly, he used a catalyst to carry out the experiment and that was the first time I learnt about a catalyst. Rakshit did not teach us for too long and the syllabus changed to inorganic chemistry. These were taught by teachers whom I quickly forgot.

Physics was taught by a number of teachers, but it was Nagen Das who took the largest number of classes. I am afraid that I remember very little of the Physics I learnt either. The teaching methods were uninspiring and on that account perhaps, I found the subject unattractive. On the other hand, as I realised much later in life, Physics is concerned with fundamental and deep questions. The professors did not pose the questions, for me at least, in a manner that could arouse my inquisitiveness.

Mathematics was yet another subject that failed to excite me and this was most unfortunate. I had opted for Mechanics as an elective subject for the School Final Examination and performed reasonably well in the finals. The Mechanics I was taught in school constituted a part of the Mathematics syllabus for ISc as well. But the teaching method was maddeningly dull and helped me forget all that I learnt in school.

The classes that I attended in the ISc course did me more harm than good and Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics helped me little to progress in my academic career at this stage of life. This is strange, to say the least, since in later life I literally fell in love with Mathematics as I specialised in Economic Theory and a good deal of my research in the subject used Mathematics that I hated in Presidency College but learnt with enthusiasm when confronted by some of the most wonderful teachers I came across. Of course, I need to admit here that my reactions to the teachers may not have been shared by my classmates. They could very well disagree with me and I have little to offer in self-defence if they do.

Despite my deficiencies, I performed manageably well in the ISc examination and my father was hell bent on sending me to an engineering college. The batch of students I belonged to was quite exceptional in this respect. The score-wise best among them opted for engineering courses and there were a few

left who were willing to continue with Physics, Chemistry or other regular science subjects. The Physics Department in particular had rarely been betrayed by the rank holders in this manner. So, what was unimaginable those days, students belonging to lower rungs easily found admission into the Physics, Geology and other Honours courses. Not that they did not flourish in later life. In fact, I have already mentioned Asish Basu, who could not find immediate admission to the Geology department. But he is a world renowned geologist today even though he could have been considered a non-starter when he joined the Geology course.

I had of course lost all interest in pursuing a science career and fought hard at home to switch to Economics, which during those days was considered an Arts subject. Once I was able to convince my father to let me off the hook, I was admitted to the Economics Department quite easily, though I cannot say that I performed particularly well there either.

The professor who moved us most was Bhabatosh Dutta, whose teaching skills are impossible to forget. He was full of humour and his classes were intensely dramatic. The students simply lapped up what he taught and I missed only one of his classes during the course of my entire BA class and that on account of some illness or the other. He reminded me of Utpal Dutt who taught us English in South Point School. Utpal Dutt's teaching was full of drama as well and the students got instantly attracted to his classes.

The other well-known teachers I was exposed to in the BA Honours class were Tapas Majumdar and Nabendu Sen. They were serious teachers. Dipak Banerjee taught us for a single day, after which he left for an assignment abroad. On that single day, however, he gave us useful advice. He drew our attention to a number books in macroeconomics which were to be avoided under all circumstances. He did not proceed beyond this.

However, around four years later, I got to know him closely, when I was selected as a research scholar in the newly instituted Centre for Economic Studies in the Economics Department. During those days, I did get to learn a good deal from him and it was he who was instrumental in my securing a fellowship in a US university to complete a PhD degree. My association with Dipak Banerjee continued till the very end of his life. As is often the case, the teacher-student relationship vanishes and is replaced by friendship. Something similar in nature occurred as far as my relationships with Nabendu Sen and Tapas Majumdar were concerned as well.

I was taught by Upendra Nath Ghoshal too, the departmental head, who clearly thought me to be the worst student in the class. Nirmal Majumdar taught us Aristotle's Politics, Nirmal Chandra Basu Roychoudhuri lectured on International relations and Ramesh Ghosh taught us Political Theory. I failed to impress the Political Science professors and ended the BA course with a firm conviction that I was an absolute nobody as far as my abilities as a student were concerned.

When those bygone days "flash upon my inward eye", I cannot help asking myself why it was that Presidency College forced me to drown deep into mediocrity and lose whatever self-confidence I possessed. I end up with a solitary explanation, which may well be incorrect. It was an age when a student's ability was judged almost entirely by the marks she or he scored. It was not easy to score high, for it involved perseverance. Hard work, that is, with a solitary goal. Not inquisitiveness about the unknown, but the sprinter's zeal for snipping off a micro-second from the time required to reach the finishing line. The philosophy inculcated unto students was hard to distinguish from the motivations that provoke a Sachin Tendulkar or a Serena Williams. Beating the opponent was possibly more important than responding to

the allure of imponderables. This was actually encouraged. It was an age when numbers scored in examinations alone sanctified. In this connection, one needs to be careful of course in pointing out that there were several instances of students who succeeded in maintaining the balance too, between high marks and a greed to learn. Mukul Majumdar was the most prominent among this latter group, but he was not the only one.

Going back to the ISc course, while it did not fulfil any major goal for me at least, viz. opening my mind to science and mathematics, I have to admit that the course was not a total waste and that for the wrong reasons. English and Bengali were compulsory subjects for us and these were taught by teachers who fascinated me. If I remember correctly it was Tarapada Chakravarty who taught us Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner. This was not the first time that I was being introduced to the work, for back in school Utpal Dutt, who was perhaps the best teacher I have ever known, taught us the same poem. Perhaps my familiarity with the poem helped me absorb Tarapada Chakravarty's version particularly well. If this was true, then it stood in contrast with my experience with Mechanics described earlier. Quite apart from him, we had Sailen Sen, Bhabatosh Chatterjee, Amal Bhattacharyya, Arun Dasgupta and a few others in the English Department and they did wonders for me. There were excellent teachers in the Bengali Department too, but the one I remember most fondly was Bhabatosh Datta.

I left college totally bereft of confidence in myself. But not all of us were cowards. In this connection, I remember my classmate Dipak Mitra (who was better known by a nickname that his peers had adorned him with but one which I shall refrain from using now). I have no idea how Dipak had performed in the School Final Examination, but I do recall that he displayed a singular disinclination towards what the

college taught. He remained unmoved by the Presidency glory throughout the two years of the ISc class. Dipak rarely attended classes and must have employed well-known tricks to be marked present during the roll call with which each class began. It was mandatory to attend a minimum percentage of the number of lectures delivered. Falling short of the percentage figure had serious consequences. Permission to attend the final ISc examination was denied. There must have been people who were so punished, but not Dipak. He managed to sit for the final examination alright. And I distinctly remember him leaving the examination hall for some subject or the other long before the final bell went off. This was unthinkable in Presidency College. The examinees were so serious that they had to be forced to stop writing beyond the announced end of the examination hour. But Dipak could not care less. He submitted his answer script at least an hour before the test was over.

Not that he failed the ISc examination. He was too smart to fail in anything he ever took up. He didn't end up with a glowing record of course as far as ISc went, but he was least bothered on that account. Following the ISc examination, he left the college in search of greener pastures. My knowledge regarding what he was upto following his encounter with Presidency College is vague at best. But I did come across him much later in life. He was a successful and highly regarded corporate lawyer at the time and, what was most important, we became close friends long after we were both out of College. Of course, given Dipak's successful career, he was a bit of a globe trotter as well and it was no easy job to drop into his office or home and chat freely.

Dipak was not incapable of playing pranks on the teachers and one incident comes readily to my mind. It involved Kajal Bose (later Sen), the beloved Kajal-di of the English Department. Kajal Bose was back from Oxford and had freshly joined the college. Women faculty members were rare those days and the only

other lady I recall teaching at the time belonged to the Botany Department. Kajal Bose was young, beautiful, full of poise, an epitome of the Bengali culture of that age. The Intermediate class on the other hand was an all boys class in an otherwise co-educational college. Few among the boys in the class had ever been taught by women teachers. I was a bit of an exception in this respect, for I had passed out of a co-educational school which employed both men and women as teachers. Dipak and the others had a different background. And Dipak, as I said, had a headful of ideas.

Although he rarely attended classes, he decided to attend Kajal Bose's class one fateful morning. He was a bit of a ventriloquist as I discovered that day. And he decided to try "confusions" with Kajal Bose. He was sitting straight faced at the back of the class as she began to lecture. When out of nowhere one heard clear notes of a sarod being played in full volume. Kajal Bose ignored this bravely for a while, but the rest of the class didn't. We began to hear giggles and the class turned unmanageably noisy. But Dipak carried on with a face devoid of any expression at all. Finally, Kajal Bose reacted.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?" she literally thundered. No one appeared to fit that description. She stood there in horrified silence for a while and finally threw out a challenge. "Is there anyone in the class who has the courage to identify the mischief monger? If there isn't, the entire class will have to pay for this."

This was a serious threat and one student responded. His name was Bishnupada Ukil. Till today I think he, like me perhaps, was a misfit in the ISc class, or in Presidency College itself. In fact, he had given me the impression that he was attracted to learning Sanskrit more than anything else. He had difficulty in expressing himself in the English language and had developed the habit of writing up his English sentences and reading them out to keep conversation going. Bishnupada stood up with his sheet of paper.

"What exactly is it that you want us to tell you Madam?" he read out loud and clear.

Kajal Bose was quite flabbergasted. She thought she had made herself amply clear and simply stared back at Bishnupada in disbelief.

But Bishnupada read on unperturbed. "Do you want us to tell you the name of the student who is creating this noise?"

At this point, Kajal Bose found back her speech. "Why, yes of course. Who is responsible for this noise?"

With a sheepish smile on his face, Bishnupada read back, "That, Madam, we cannot tell you!"

I have a vague memory that, to her credit, Kajal Bose courageously continued with her class, ignoring the sounds that continued to pollute the air and that Dipak probably never showed up for Kajal Bose's classes again.

None of the three people involved in this anecdote live today. Kajal-di, after a successful career, passed away. Bishnupada, who joined

the WBCS, left us many years ago, following a heart attack. And Dipak himself was the last one to leave. He was suffering from the most dreaded of afflictions. Fortunately though, his suffering was short lived. I went to see him in the ICU at Bellevue Clinic, where he was languishing in a semi-conscious state, but he did recognise me and gestured me to come closer to him. I went as close as I could, defying the barriers of tubes and other medical equipment. His voice was faint, though I heard him quite clearly. "Don't lament," he said. And that may have been the last words he spoke to anyone at all. He left us the next day.

Dipak was fond of translating Tagore songs into English and he had even published a book, Echoes, a few years ago. He presented me a copy of this book and here are a few lines from the first song in the book:

"Remember me yet if I am gone afar, If old love is overlaid with a web of fresh passion: If you know me not, even if I am near, As I were a shadow that might not be, remember me yet."

