

Looking Back With Fondness: My College Days In Presidency

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I was the only male student in my class. Naturally, I was an object of envy to my male friends studying other subjects like Geology because they did not have even one female student in their class. When I was in the third year, the scenario became more interesting: Tapas Chowdhury, one year senior to me in the English Department, was the only man in his class. In the second year class Sudipto Chattopadhyay - now a well-known film director - was also the only one; and the newly admitted freshers also had only Shubhabrata Bhattacharyya as the only young man. The students of the other Departments spread the word that the English Department had begun to keep one seat reserved for the boys as they were not able to compete with the girls in the Admission Test. It was a time when an aspirant student could apply for admission to the College with requisite marks in the plus-two final examination, but would get

admitted only on the basis of the marks secured in the Admission Test. One year later, the jinx was broken and four boys got admitted to the English Department.

I distinctly remember that Dilip-da - our famous Office Assistant - asked me confidentially at the time of admission, "You seem to be a very docile boy. Are you sure you will be able to continue your studies here for three long years? No other boy will be with you in class. Will you be able to adjust with all the girls in your class? They may rag you!" I was touched by his concern for me. So, I assured him by narrating to him the following experience I had in my early boyhood.

My mother, who was a much-feared Assistant Teacher in her school, had been the Superintendent of the Girls' Hostel of the school for a year. I was only eight at that time. In the evenings, when my Mom would remain busy with cooking,

I used to be entrusted with the job of strolling through the hostel corridors to see whether all the girls were studying. It was my duty to inform my Mom if I saw anyone loafing around instead of studying. For this I used to be regularly ragged by the senior students, but I did not flinch from carrying out the responsibility thrust upon me.

Dilip-da did not appear convinced, but gave me a weak smile and said, "Okay. Tell me if you need any help at any time." I remembered those words, and Dilip-da helped me a lot when my father died suddenly just before my Part II exams. But that is another story.

I began my classes in Rooms Number 23 and 22 in the Main building of the Department, and instantly fell in love with the Room No.23. The big windows, the trees outside, with the sky partly visible, lent the room a special atmosphere which has remained with me ever since. I can still visualize our Professors Kalidas Bose, Kajal Sengupta or Sukanta Chaudhuri (SCH) taking our classes sitting on the chair on the podium in that room.

As Dilip-da had feared, some of my classmates tried to rag me for the first few days. I remember that I was 'court-martialled' one day on some pretext. Prabhsharan Aurora, a Punjabi girl who attended classes for only a few days, acted as my defence advocate. Sadly, I cannot recall if I was given any punishment by the sitting judge; in fact, I cannot even remember who the 'judge' was. If

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I have to guess, it must have been Jashodhara, our first girl.

I quickly became friends with the twelve girls who remained in my batch. I also had some school-mates who had got admitted in the Geology and Physics Department. So, I made some new friends through them. Through Susanta Bose – my school-mate at Mitra Institution (Bhabanipur) – I met Somak Raychaudhuri, Goutam Mondal, Sreerup Raychaudhury, Partha Ray, Pinaki Poddar and some other students of the Physics Department. It was an enriching experience for me to see their brilliance from such close quarters: Sreerup, who is now with Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, was a

very good cartoonist, and wrote excellent English. We were amazed to read his English translations of Sukumar Ray's nonsense rhymes of 'Abol Tabol' long before SCH started his work of translation of Ray's nonsense rhymes. Somak, who is now the Head of the Physics Department, has been a good friend since then.

Very few students of Presidency University will believe that at one point of time we were thirteen students in our class, and there were eleven teachers in the English Department. It was our good fortune to see SCH and his wife Supriya Chaudhuri (SCh) join our Department when we were about to start our Part-II classes. Not only were they very good teachers, but it was because of their enthusiasm that we were able to organize two pleasure trips in 1985. In January, about twenty-eight students – with only four boys in the team – went to Puri with them (not to forget their little son Siddartha). Our most favourite Professor Kajaldi (the late Kajal Sengupta) and Surabhidi (Dr Surabhi Banerjee) completed the group. In November, the Chaudhuris had only two boys and seven girls to accompany them to Rajasthan. I, a post-graduate student at that time, was fortunate to be among the boys in both the trips.

In the little space of this write-up I would like to share our memorable experience during those trips. SCH, who – in his own words – was on the 'wrong side of thirty' at that time, was a very sporting man. He did not smoke, but soon

after we boarded the train to Puri he told the boys to feel free if they wanted to smoke. Then he halted and corrected himself: "I mean, the same applies to the girls also, if any of them smokes." So far as I can recall, only one boy had the bad habit, but he shied away from smoking openly. As for the girls, they were rather 'old-fashioned' and none of them had picked up the habit. We discovered later that an 'old girl' smoked.

After we reached Puri we put up in a rented house, away from the din and bustle of Swargadwar. It was a one-storey little house with a garden and open courtyard with benches of concrete on both sides. We enjoyed our cosy stay there. The sea-beach was not very far, and we had a blast while we were bathing in the sea. Every day, Kajaldi used to go for her morning-walk to the beach; but if any of us tried to accompany her she would get angry. She told us that she had enough of our company in college as well as during the trip; so, for once during the day, we should stop following her and leave her alone.

The boys did not like the idea of letting Kajaldi go alone. We decided to give her some covert security. On the second morning, two of us trailed her at a considerable distance so that she did not notice us. It was then that we discovered that she went to the beach, walked up and down for some time, and then sat down on the sand to smoke a cigarette with a holder on her lips! Utterly surprised, we could understand why she did not want

anyone of us to go with her during those morning walks! She was a habitual smoker, but did not want any of us to know that or follow her example.

The shock was all the greater because in those days smoking & drinking did not go with the image of an erudite, cultured and dignified Bengali lady. Kajaldi appeared to us in college as the epitome of the Bengali mother. Dressed in a simple red-bordered white cotton saree with an austere looking starched white blouse - with her attractive salt-and-pepper (more salt than pepper) hair pinned in a bun at the back of her head - she used to take our classes day after day. The only make-up she allowed herself was some lipstick and some 'kajol' on her eyes.

Though Kajaldi did not have a child of her own she made us all her children. I was an average student by our college standards, but she always encouraged me. I remember that she wrote in my Part-II Test answer script (on *Macbeth* which she taught us) the following words: "Congratulations, Nirmalya! Your improvement is remarkable. Keep it up!" She never let me know how disappointing my performance had so far been. Some years after I had left college, my brother Neil needed some attestation to be done when he was applying for admission in Presidency. He went to the Professors' room and saw Kajaldi. Neil knew her from my photos of the Puri tour. Initially, Kajaldi curtly told him that it was not her job. But when Neil told her

about me, she exclaimed with a broad smile, drew up a chair, asked him to sit beside her, enquired about me and our mother, and attested all the documents my brother offered her. Kajaldi could be very harsh but she was truly like a doting mother.

Our Puri trip was memorable for another reason. SCH was translating the nonsense rhymes of Sukumar Ray at that time for his son; it was more of a fun activity for him. He recited a few on our request on the train itself. We were so overwhelmed and praised his efforts so much that he took it more seriously; and *'The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray'* was published some time later.

As I have mentioned, the Rajasthan trip saw only a few of us accompanying the Chaudhuris. We missed Kajaldi because she could not go with us this time. However, it was a great trip. We went to Jaipur via Mount Abu, Udaypur and Chittorgarh. SCH was a very enthusiastic photographer and took a lot of snaps during the tour. I remember she lay flat on her back on the floor of a room inside the Dilwara Temple in order to take a close shot of the intricate designs on the ceiling of that room. The amazing art-work on white stone in the temple left us spellbound.

A hilarious incident occurred at the Chittorgarh Railway Station during our trip. I, accompanied by Srimati Basu (two years junior to me in college), had gone to buy tickets to Jaipur. We had concession forms with us; and

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I had filled out a form. When the booking clerk saw Srimati's name on the form, he asked me, "Here it's written 'Srimati Basu'. Srimati kya Basu? Pura naam toh likho!" I took immense pains to explain that "Srimati" was indeed her name; it was another name of Radha (as in Radha-Krishna, I told the dazed man at the counter); so, if he insisted I could add another 'Srimati' before

her name. But it seemed "Srimati Srimati Basu" was too tough for the man to digest.

After ten minutes of such bewildering exchange of words, the booking clerk was too exasperated to argue any further with me; and by that time a queue had begun to form behind us. They were getting restive. It did not help matters that during those ten minutes Srimati had been laughing hysterically by my side, uttering "I can't believe this!" We could get our tickets only after those unforgettable ten minutes.

Srimati and her friends were fund managers on the tour. They insisted on the following dictum:

travelling was the primary job, eating secondary; so, if you have to cut down on costs, do it on food. In Jaipur one day, I vaguely recall all of us having improvised sandwiches with lots of vegetables and some kebabs for lunch. I was so fed up with the menu that I secretly went to the Railway Station and had some "machher-jhol-and-bhaat" that afternoon.

Somebody told me that SCH was rather wary about a long tour with the group. He thought "people tend to get on one another's nerves after three or four days"; so it was always better to have a trip of short duration. But as things turned out, all of us developed a

secure bonding with one another for our lifetime. Most of us are Facebook friends even today.

My college days have been the best phase of my life in spite of my personal problems. For this I would thank my stars, my classmates, my juniors, and my teachers like Sukantada, Supriyadi, Amarnath Bandyopadhyay, Atish Ranjan Bandyopadhyay. Kajaldi is no more. I wonder how she would have reached to my reminiscences.

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