



My College Days Memories and Musings

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I started at Presidency College in July 1969. The first feeling was one of self-congratulation at having got admission into Physics Honours, which had the reputation then of being the hardest department to be admitted to. We did not have to take an admission test, unlike those who entered other departments like English and perhaps Economics. All admissions were on the basis of school-leaving marks. The then recently-retired Principal of the College, R.L. Sengupta, who had been department head in physics before his elevation to the college administration, had reportedly expressed an opinion to the effect that students who had done the Indian School Certificate (or "Senior Cambridge" as it used to be known just before our time) were unfit for higher studies, especially in physics and especially in Presidency. Being one of the guilty ones who had not come through the West Bengal Higher Secondary examination (apart from people like us who had done the ISC, there were also students who had done the pre-university examination), I was one of the minorities in my class, which was full of other students who were referred to with bated breath by some of our compatriots—"x was first in the Higher Secondary examination, y was second in the Higher Secondary" and so on.

As far as I remember there were 35 men and one woman in our class, though I am not sure whether this was before those who wanted to study medicine left or after. One of the first lessons we learnt was that there were two kinds of classes, one in one's honours field, where one was supposed to concentrate, and pass subjects, which some students regarded primarily as a means of annoying

instructors. I remember one of our honours instructors, a young man who went by the abbreviated name of S.S., starting his class by saying that since we were not going to learn any mathematics in pass class (because of the culture of neglecting pass subjects) and since we needed mathematics in physics, he was going to have to teach what we needed before he started teaching his subject. Then followed a course in mathematics taught at frenetic pace. Those of us who had the ISC background had had a couple of years of calculus and this helped in the first two weeks, before differential equations, vector analysis, calculus of variations and finally classical mechanics swept us away along with many of the others. There suddenly seemed to be great interest in exploring careers in medicine in our class! I remain immensely grateful to Salil Sarkar and to Presidency for putting us through this trial by fire, for it is true that these first few months constituted nearly all the mathematics I was to learn at college.

I had joined the three-year degree course but it turned out this was a misnomer. The University of Calcutta was slipping towards complete chaos. Examinations were delayed, publication of the results was delayed even further. Many years later, I heard of how Ph.D. theses were thrown on the floor of a dusty room in the university building, waiting (for years) to be sent out to external examiners. Trying to find out when examinations would be held (from the Controller of Examinations) turned out to be impossible to achieve.

These were also the years of the Naxalite movement, romanticized by future generations of students and myth-

makers in the newspapers. A number of committed revolutionaries had left the college to work in the villages of Medinipur. Within the college, the movement often manifested itself by public beatings of supporters of the Congress party on the main steps of the college and strictures passed on the length of sideburns by the politburo in the canteen. (Apparently, the Chhatra Parishad in later years tried to regulate women's outfits in college, so maybe the Naxalites were cultural trend-setters.) This is not to decry the dedication shown by individuals of all shades of opinion; they at least tried to engage seriously with issues larger than their own careers and the usual pre-occupations of college students.

There were also frequent strikes, which evidently annoyed the physics department head, S.N. Ghoshal, whose class was once interrupted by strikers from our own department. At least two faculty members, one in Economics (who was actually politically left-wing) and one in Chemistry, were harassed. One day there was an attack on a lab in which a lead-acid battery was thrown at a well-loved physics professor (who was fortunately not hurt). This was in our second year, and college closed "sine die" as a result. This was an interesting situation - we had to prepare for the examinations eventually, so not having classes was costly. On the other hand, the additional leisure time enabled some of us to read beyond our standard course fare. I remember struggling through economics books, mainly to try to evaluate whether the Naxalite critique of society had any validity. I also read through Karl Popper's "Open Society" and "Logic of Scientific Discovery", which together constituted a powerful antidote to the Naxalites and a crucial influence on my own development, though I think now that a simplistic interpretation of Popper is misleading. (I thought for a few weeks thereafter of doing a Master's in Philosophy of Science but decided against it because I was sure jobs in that field would be scarce.) I discovered Popper through a footnote in one of Bertrand Russell's books praising Volume 1 of "The Open Society" for its perceptive criticism, I believe, of Aristotle! It was interesting to read the recent book "Wittgenstein's Poker" about the relationship between Russell, Wittgenstein and Popper. Russell apparently rarely mentioned Popper, so I had been lucky to have seen the footnote, though Popper sometimes spoke of Russell as the greatest philosopher since Kant.

1971 was also the year of the Bangladesh movement. On one of the days when a strike had stopped classes, we stood

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on the balcony of Baker Labs and listened on February 21 to Hemanta Mukherjee render his unforgettable Sukanto Bhattacharya's songs in the university courtyard next door. Inside the college, my classmate, Himadri Pakrashi, regaled us with songs that were almost as good.

My third year in college saw a new political dispensation take hold. The Naxalites were gone, as they were throughout the state. As far as I know, however, the Chhatra Parishad, which took over, discontinued the practice of beating up political opponents inside the college (though the police were certainly doing this in the state as a whole). This was possibly due to their leader, Neptune Srimal, being an avowed Gandhian who had been assaulted several times himself during the Naxalite days. Classes were held normally and other college activities resumed. I was interested myself in debating and several debates were organized in the college. The tradition of the Freshers' Debate, where the audience drowned out what the speakers had to say unless they were especially persistent, however, continued through the years I was in college. While I was a student at the Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta, I was invited back by the then Debating Secretary, Sugata Bose, to be a judge at the Freshers' Debate. One of the prize winners was my future (and late) wife, Kumkum, who later became an eminent historian. She had not been told of the tradition of unruly heckling in the Freshers' Debate and was outraged by what she saw and at anyone who seemed to be an organizer.

The President of Bangladesh, who was an alumnus of the

college, made a well-publicised visit. This was of course before the one-party system instituted by Sheikh Mujib and the awful events surrounding his ouster and the accession of his former colleague, Khondkar Mushtaq Ahmed, to power.

The three-year degree course finally ended in four years and I decided to leave physics and go for a MBA at the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. To some extent, I had got interested in economics and the social sciences during extra-curricular reading in college and felt that it was worth trying to see if there was a career in that field, with the backup option of getting a job as an executive if I turned out to be no good at it. Two people I knew at Presidency had gone on to the IIM; I had thought of both as extremely sharp as well as very good company. One, Dipesh Chakraborty, had done his MBA and had started doing a Ph.D. in history, while at IIM! In Presidency, he too had studied physics. It is probably tempting after the fact to say that he was clearly destined for great things, but, in fact, he was one of the most incisive and analytical people I had met in college. (I am not too clear now how I knew him, since he was about four years senior to us.) He is now, of course, an eminent historian. The second was Indrajit Gupta, who had in fact studied History at Presidency (and was also from my school), who had a later successful career as a software executive and now management professor.

At IIMC, I had my first formal courses in economics, and the course of Amitava Bose in the second year (in which I floundered for a substantial part) enhanced my desire to pursue this as a field. Earlier courses, with Ranjit Sau, Jati Sengupta, Nirmal Chandra and Susmita Rakshit, had also played a major role.

There are Presidencians almost everywhere in economics, whether at the University of Sydney or the University of Caen. It is interesting how even after all these years the profile of a typical economics graduate student from Calcutta is an undergraduate degree from Presidency followed by a Master's at the Indian Statistical Institute (another contribution of a Presidencian to India) or the Delhi School of Economics. It is a pity that somehow very few potential economics Ph.D. students go on to the University of Calcutta for a MA after Presidency; a pity for the University of Calcutta.

My own career progressed through the MBA to operations research to economics. I started doing game theory before it became the rage in economics (and after it had all but

disappeared from operations research). Presidency's economics department is of course well-known for its alumni. Like nearly every department in the college, it prepares its students to become contributors to their respective disciplines. I don't have the figures with me, but the proportion of Presidency undergraduates who become academics or researchers must be among the highest for any undergraduate college anywhere in the world. Going into economics inevitably meant running into Presidency alumni.

From our physics undergraduate class, a large group is abroad, mostly still working in physics or applied physics. Some have professorships in India, including one who actually left the college during the enforced gap in our second year as well as the sole woman in our class, who is now a well-established scientist. A group of those of us who went abroad in 1975 had planned a "Big Chill" moment; we were supposed to all meet in twenty years in the portico of Presidency College some time in August. This included a couple of friends who were actually not from Presidency but had become honorary Presidencians, as it were. It turned out when the twenty years were up that it was more convenient to meet in America rather than in the college. A meeting in the Poconos in Pennsylvania was arranged (this is a few hours from New York) and about half the original group attended. Unfortunately, I couldn't go. Apart from me, one other person from our class did a MBA (at the IIM Ahmedabad), but unlike me, he chose to pursue a corporate career. Another classmate became a professor of finance, doing a Ph.D. in that field, while several others work in research labs or as R&D managers. There are relatively few from our class in academic physics in US universities reflecting perhaps the paucity of jobs in that field, though there are some academic stars. Even though I left physics myself many years ago, I was quite pleased to be able to spend the summer of 2016 at the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics, as an "econophysics" visitor. I was happy to become acquainted and re-acquainted with some very talented individuals.

There were three students in our physics class who had done the I.S.C. examination. Of these one, Debi Prasad Mitra, tragically died young, of a brain tumour. He visited the US several times for treatment but it proved of no avail.

I find in going through what I have written that I haven't said much about our professors. Presidency College has

always had its quota of legendary academic mentors like Taraknath Sen in English. I believe (though my physics ended at the undergraduate stage I might be totally wrong) that the most eminent academic who taught us in those days was Amal Raychaudhury, who did seminal work in relativity. I was sorry to read in the newspapers last year that he had not survived the extremely hot Calcutta summer of 2005 and had passed away from heat stroke. I remember A.K.R. also in the lab, where he would never get up from his chair. (There is a story in one of George Gamow's books that theoretical physicists can cause instruments to malfunction just by looking at them-I believe the story was about Wolfgang Pauli-so AKR might have been trying to save our experiments!) However, he could give us perfectly precise directions on how to resolve our problems without having to get up from his chair. I was also fortunate in coming to know some eminent professors from other departments, probably through the debating

society, including Dipak Banerjee and Amiya Bagchi from Economics, Amal Mukhopadhyay from Political Science and Mihir Chowdhury from Chemistry (who had also taught us).

In 1972-73, a group of students and faculty had composed a document about an autonomous Presidency College. This found its way to the Chhatra Parishad, who apparently rejected it (at least it was never seen again) as "elitist". One of the faculty involved had told us earlier that this was its likely fate. Now that Presidency University is a reality, my vague recollections of that document confirm how completely unrealistic the students involved in drafting parts of it were. We had no clue of the nature of the difficulties that the new university would face. India has also changed since 1972, especially in the availability of resources, which make it difficult to compete for faculty in the sciences.

