

My Days in Presidency College

Arup Acharya *

At what appears to be hoary past but, in reality, a little more than a mere half a century ago, a young lad, recently arrived from the then East Pakistan, found himself loitering in the corridors of the great Presidency College. He had left his hometown and his old school behind just after Partition, somehow found a new school to pass his Matriculation examination from, secured a result good enough to get himself a seat in the “first year science” class, and also a small college stipend to go with it.

The rapport of the gawky youngster with the great institution was not particularly warm to start with. Presidency College had “class” -both intellectually as well as socially (does it still have?), and the shy youngster had a vague feeling of being ignored and left out. The teachers, not all of them brilliant or inspiring, seemed distant and uncaring. There was another problem which the freshers faced right at the very beginning. In those days English medium schools were not in overwhelming fashion and most of the entrants were unfamiliar with lectures delivered in English, often with impeccable British (Oxford or Cambridge?) accents. Mercifully, this phase lasted only for a short time - maybe a month or so- but as long as it did the young scholars could not help feeling a little bewildered and lost. Add to this the fact that in those days the high school curriculum did not include practically anything remotely connected with science, and you may get an idea of the predicament of these freshers wallowing in the quagmire of Newton’s laws of motion, Archimedes’ Principle and Dalton’s atomic theory- all in English suit and tie.

Gradually and gradually the mists began to clear and one started feeling, almost imperceptibly, the magic that was Presidency College. What was that elusive magic? Maybe it was partly the physical environment of the college with the age old *debdaru* trees near its entrance, the clock tower with its ever still clock hands, the long Baker Laboratory building with its elegant simplicity and the green grassy field where one could and did play cricket in winter (if, of course, one had that much time to spare) with, once in a while, a teacher or two joining in. But in the main it was something more subtle – a special ambience, an ambience created by a host of factors such as a community of intellectually sharp and eager students, a bevy of learned teachers (some of them quite illustrious), the spacious libraries

* Alumnus 1948–54 (Physics)

with large collections of books and journals, the frequent debates and seminars (and sometimes conferences), the College's deep involvement in post graduate teaching, its research laboratories, etc. etc.

A community of students who are academically good performers (as ensured by the College's admission policy) does indeed include a large proportion of intelligent, eager and inquiring young minds who not only benefit immensely from interactions with each other, but also extract the best out of their teachers. In fact, although they do not know it such students do inspire their teachers and the latter feel rejuvenated by such interactions.

The teachers in Presidency College formed a special class. In those days there were several good colleges in Calcutta, with many renowned teachers teaching in them. But unfortunately, due, maybe, to a problem of attitude and outlook, the sole concerns of these colleges seemed to lie in the syllabi and the examination results. There is nothing wrong in taking care of the syllabus and striving for good examination results, but what we call education is a little more than just that. It is here that Presidency College teachers (at least many of them) differed from the others. Of course. Presidency College could boast, almost in every department, of some outstanding and renowned senior professors whose aura could be felt by generations of students. But there were other teachers too, no doubt of lesser renown and status, who did not lag very far behind.

I shall cite one example. While we were almost finishing our second year mathematics course, in came a teacher (just returned from abroad) to take up some classes on algebra, in particular, on the summation of infinite series. Infinite series of some kind we were already familiar with, but to us it was more a matter of jugglery with formulas and numbers than understanding what it was all about. What we did not know was what was actually meant by the *sum* of a series which went on and on and never ended (and were blissfully unaware that a precise definition of such a *sum* was essential). He "wasted" several classes in painstakingly explaining to us the elements of the concepts of convergence and limit of an infinite sequence. Strictly speaking this was beyond our syllabus and maybe some of us felt bored. But again some must have felt thrilled. It sort of opened a small window into the beautiful world of what is called higher mathematics.

Later, in our "fourth year" B.Sc. class (in those days we had two-year B.A./B.Sc. courses, including Honours ones) we had another of many similar experiences. Thermodynamics was one of the most beautiful subjects in the undergraduate level, offering as it did a lot of information about the properties of a physical system out of very little input, so to say. The second law of thermodynamics, in particular, was a beauty. But it can be regarded as basically postulatory, in the sense that it told you *how* Nature actually behaved, but did not tell you *why* she chose to behave that way. Several months into our fourth year class a senior professor walked in to take up a number of classes on some portions of thermodynamics. The experience was, to say the least, delightful ! He not only made us see the beauty of the subject but also made us realize, although vaguely, that a system of large number of minute particles (atoms

and molecules) of which all matter was made up, will, left to itself, necessarily behave in accordance with the second law of thermodynamics. This, of course, was statistical mechanics, and at a later stage we had the opportunity of going deeper into it, but the memory of the first thrill of observing the fusion of apparently two different disciplines (heat and mechanics) into one still remains. It was the first time we began to realize, although somewhat vaguely, that physics was not a set of isolated laws but there was an underlying unity amongst all of them.

All this does not mean that in Presidency College all teachers were good or inspiring. Far from it. It had, like other colleges, its quota of indifferent teachers. But this did not apparently affect the intellectual ambience of the great institution.

One word about research. I do not know why no other college in Calcutta (even the very good ones) has any facilities for research, particularly experimental research. Possibly there is no scope for funding, maybe in the crowded conditions most of them work no space for laboratories may be made available, maybe there are other compelling reasons. But the involvement of Presidency College in research (in whatever modest scale)—both theoretical and experimental—symbolized, in particular, by its research laboratories, gave the institution a special character. Again, it was another window into what we may call higher knowledge.

Before coming to a conclusion I must humbly submit that your author had always been a back-bencher. So, if his experiences had been so refreshing you can easily imagine those of the really good ones. I hope some of them write in this journal.

POSTSCRIPT

Presidency College is an old institution - nearly two hundred years old if we link its ancestry with that of the Hindu College. During all these years the College has more or less continued to maintain its academic excellence and fulfil its duties to the society at large. One may, however, raise a pertinent question : will it go on doing so in the near as well as not so near future? While there is no immediate cause for worry I think awareness of a couple of important issues is not uncalled for. One arises out of the fact that Presidency College is a government college and everything related to it- its funding, its faculty structure, its policies— is controlled by the government, except perhaps a few internal matters which are left to the College administration. Until now it seems that no serious problem has arisen in this respect and hopefully it will continue to be so. But suppose some day some politically powerful person starts toying with the idea that Presidency College is an “elitist” institution and that it does not merit any special treatment and should be brought in line with other government colleges (I may be wrong, but I vaguely remember that several years back some such move was set afoot but was later dropped). You may argue that Presidency College is an elite institution - not an “elitist” one- and that such an institution has a vital function to perform, namely, *it sustains the flow of quality into the society*, and any tampering with such institutions will stop this flow. But suppose nobody who matters listens to you! I don't believe any such thing will really happen. But should it ever do so, well, you can only pray.

Instead of downgrading the elite institutions I believe that time has come for following an opposite policy. Since in the present scenario the supply of money as well as of talent seems to be relatively plentiful why not build up several more such elite institutions? The average quality of students since our time has improved significantly. So why not give a larger section of the students the opportunity of an “elitist” education?

The second issue is genuinely disturbing. One observes with concern that everywhere in India bright young people are shying away from pure science and research (“Arts” had been a casualty from still earlier days). This had been a more or less common thing even during our days. After I.Sc. (today’s Higher Secondary) most of our class mates would flock to professional institutions like engineering and medical colleges. But the top few would stay on in the general line (if I remember correctly, in my time seven out of the top ten students opted for physics honours and one for mathematics - all in Presidency College).

As days went on this tendency gained momentum but in very recent times the flow has turned into an avalanche. The reason is the sudden and phenomenal growth of the IT industry world over in roughly the last couple of decades. Information technology(IT) is like a great revolution. It has changed the face of the earth, so to say, and with its immense potential promises to bring many more fundamental changes, - concomitantly creating huge amount of wealth and large number of jobs. India, with its huge reservoir of educated man- power, has tried to exploit the situation by grabbing a large number of plush (“plush” in the Indian context, not in the western) jobs going abegging and letting bright young men and women flock to foreign shores (USA in particular). All this is, no doubt, welcome because of the wealth and jobs this is creating in India. But as a result of the huge difference in the average income of qualified IT and non-IT personnel everybody is making a beeline for the IT jobs and the education / training necessary to secure such jobs. No wonder, under such an environment bright students will fight shy of institutions like Presidency College or, for that matter, any institution of pure knowledge. What is the way out? It seems that nobody really knows. But the problem is there and in the near future, before India’s intellectual prowess becomes hopelessly lopsided, one has to find a way. I earnestly hope that a way will be found.