

Jatish Chandra Sengupta



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My Father, The Principal

My years in the English Honours class in Presidency College happened to be the last two years of the tenure of my father's Principalship in Presidency College. The stigma of being the Principal's daughter stuck to me and was revived in later years when I married a near-contemporary. Looking back, was it a stigma ? How did the public and the private mesh in my memory of my father ?

As a little girl, Deshapriya Park used to be our afternoon playground. Even in the thick of my games I would never miss the sight of my father with his usual briefcase getting off the tramcar at the Rashbehari-Lansdowne crossing. I would run out of the gate, touch base and come back to play. Without being a patriarch he had brought a stable core to my life that has given me strength in this world with its multiple call for destabilization. Everyone has forgotten that he wrote two school text-books for children, called *Prakriti Parichay* (Introducing Nature) and *Bijnan Rahasya* (The Mystery of Science).

I was never much of an outdoor person myself, but my father was. Born in an East Bengal village, he loved sports and swam like a fish. He was keen on girls being athletic, as Professor Sandhya Mitra has written, and I think I disappointed him. However, this did not prevent me from going out with him on Sunday afternoons on Southern suburban trains to collect specimens for his research. In the urban setting in which he spent most of his adult

Jasodhara Bagchi*

life, he missed the greenery of his village. The beautiful natural setting of the University of Heidelberg, that I visited later, was often in his thoughts. He had planned to name his house *Outberg* by combining Outshahi, his village in Dhaka, and Heidelberg, where he did his D.Phil.Nat. in Botanical Sciences. We had to prevent this move on aesthetic grounds ! He loved planting trees in houses of friends which had grounds and sun. His schoolmate Prof. Sushobhan Sarkar's house in Naktala and Prof. Sivatosh and Anjali Mookerjee's house in Madhyamgram were his favourites.

I have often wondered if it was the same love of things green and growing that kept him committed to his students all his life. This special feel for the aspirations of the youth, he did not lose even as an Administrator. The unobtrusive egalitarianism with which he loved his students and kept in touch with throughout his life has remained a 'best practice' role model for me in my teaching life.

Annihilating all that is made

To a green thought in a green shade.

These two memorable and cryptic lines of the seventeenth-century English poet Andrew Marvell have encapsulated the memory of my Botanist father.

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With all my later questioning of 'disinterestedness' and the so-called 'objectivity' of science, I discover something of a true scientist's scepticism in the ways my father responded to the world. There was never any overt wooing of religion in him nor any blatant denigration. He had a special eye for the funny in anything disproportionate and had wanted to train as

a cartoonist in his youth. His favourite family reading that he shared with me, were Parashuram's *Goddalika* and *Kajjwali*. Jatindramohan Sen's illustrations formed an integral part of the text for him. Barrister O. K. Sen in Birinchipabba was his hottest favourite. Years later, when my four-year old daughter Tista came back from Cambridge with me, she teamed up with her grandfather in sketching, mostly human beings. The sketch of her grandfather that Tista has contributed to the Centenary brochure is a tribute to this shared activity. By then my father's ambition to be a cartoonist had evaporated.

Despite his unmistakable love of and commitment to institutions like Presidency College, my father was something of a maverick. Trying to figure this out for myself I think one of the major reasons may have been that unlike most of the distinguished academics of his generation, he was trained, not in the Anglo-Saxon establishment, but in Germany. Heidelberg shares, with Bologna, Paris and Oxbridge, the reputation of being among the oldest Universities in Europe. He must have been motivated by his teacher Professor Brühl, with whom he started his long life of research in the post-graduate department of Botany of Calcutta University in Ballygunge. It specially moved him, therefore, when, in the years to come, he was honoured by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, with the Brühl memorial medal for his outstanding contribution to the Botanical Sciences. This event was attended by many dignitaries among whom Prof. R. K. Das Gupta still recalls this event with pleasure.

I visited Heidelberg during the first Summer Vacation in 1959 from my three-year stay at Oxford. In the days when there were no Max Mueller Bhavans to introduce students to the intricacies of the German language, my father had mastered enough of it to write his thesis in the language in two years. His friends in Germany marvelled at his mastery over the language and even commented on his knowledge of dialects around Heidelberg. A distinguished Nobel Laureate in Chemistry whom I met there, confirmed that Professor Ludwig Jost, who was my father's professor, used to talk about this distinguished Indian student of his (the only one he had) to his colleagues. His gracious widow, Frau Jost, who invited me to lunch confirmed this assessment, some thirty years after he had left on completion of his degree. He left on the threshold of the thirties, when Nazism was beginning to raise its ugly head in Germany. Several of his Jewish friends were persecuted in the years to come. My father found it difficult and painful to believe that Germans were capable of such brutality.

It is ironical that the Founder Secretary of the Presidency College Alumni Association was not an alumnus of the college. The reputation of Acharya Girish Chandra Bose drew him to Bangabasi College instead. His real talent as a botanist flowered in Ballygunge Science College, where he topped the M.Sc. examination and started to do research under Professor Brühl. Many years later, talking to the director of Max Mueller Bhavan, who was about to compile material on Germans in Calcutta, I realized that they did not know of the existence of such a German academic who had made Calcutta his home. However, my father loved to talk about his happy days in Science College and took pride in informing my mother, who was a very good cook, that the best prawn curry he had eaten was cooked by himself while doing research in Ballygunge Science College. He, of course, resisted all persuasion on our part that he should demonstrate this ability just once ! With all his love of good food, I had never seen him anywhere near our kitchen. Anyway, there was something fitting about the fact that it is to this institution that he went back in the last year of his life. As a Retired Scientist he revelled in the company of his distinguished pupils like Professors Arun and Archana Sharma. It was outside the first entrance of the Ballygunge Science College that he was robbed of his life by the "sneaking thief, men call Death" (Chaucer). In that dark hour I realized why his students meant so much to him. I, his only child simply sat with my sick mother in a state of dazed shock. His students arranged everything for his last journey. His

wish to die in harness was fulfilled. Professor Satyen Bose who waited in the Asiatic society to bid him farewell, expressed the feelings of many when he said : 'A man of action he has left in the middle of activity !'

Presidency College

Twenty-seven of the most valuable years of his life were spent in Presidency College. On the boat coming back, his younger brother Sourindra Nath Sen sent him a copy of the advertisement for this post, and he joined it in 1929. When he got married to my mother in 1930, he enjoyed telling me, he found my mother's name NILIMA printed on the blackboard when he went to take his first class after the event! The Botany Department in those days, had a great deal of social occasions, and I used to accompany my parents as a little girl. On one such occasion I was presented to my father's august teacher Professor Subodh Chandra Mahalanobis, uncle of the great Professor. I still remember the thrill I felt when he greeted me as 'kanya ratna' (the gem-girl) ! It came back to me specially when I took up an action research on the girl child in West Bengal, and has remained an advocate ever since. I also remember the steamer parties, which were great fun. In those days our mothers used to take regular interest in the cooking that went on in the makeshift kitchen on the steamer. My mother who was a wonderful singer, used to sing on many of those occasions. I have often wondered which of my stages of involvement with Presidency College I enjoyed most, being a Presidency College baby, a student, a wife (my husband Amiya Bagchi was a Professor in the department of Economics, for the first ten years of our married life,—he later became the head of the department), or half a mother (my daughter Tista was a student of the College for her Statistics Pass and compulsory additional English, when she did Linguistics Honours in Sanskrit College, across the road). I must confess that my childhood association with the scientific wing of the College stands in close competition with my blissful student days. My mother, who had a special feel for imaginative allocation of space, used to marvel at the little shack along the playground of the college, where only the head could be inserted, in which my father's young student Jagadish Saha used to conduct his experiments on medicinal plants ! It is in these simple surroundings that I saw my father keep alive his scientific research. This is where he gathered the galaxy of brilliant students starting with Nirad Kumar Sen who died of cancer, while my father was alive, and so many others of whom he was proud throughout his life. Even when he was persuaded to accept the duties of a Principal, he agreed only on one condition. He would spend one half of the day with his students in the laboratory and discharge his administrative duties in the other half. The other passion that he brought to his duties as a teacher, was his love of sports. For years he was teacher-in-charge of Sports in Presidency College, that made him a friend of A. W. Mahmood, for instance. It is a matter of great gratification that Sri Prabir Guha Thakurta has written to commemorate this aspect and that another favourite pupil Sandhya Mitra has placed on record his encouragement of girls actively participating in sports, something he could never achieve with his daughter ! Even two days before he died, he wanted to take part in the college Sports. His students prevented him and possibly averted his dying on the College sports ground.

As a Principal he showed a quiet determination towards institution building. He had a vision that always tried to go beyond the parochial and the provincial and shape the institution to fulfil international standards and get properly placed on the national map of the country. I would like to emphasize this, because the alumni of the college often get bogged down in the groove of personal memory and association. What I observed then I could only fathom later, was a disinterested broadmindedness, without which no institution can be adequately developed. His ambition was to see that the college kept abreast of the developments

on the national scene. It was not a matter of personal ambition for him. He did become a Fellow of the National Science Academy later and a member of the council of C.S.I.R for many years. But he had ambitions to see Presidency College grow into an institution of national importance.

His founding of the Alumni Association was a step towards that, and the following year he invited Dr Rajendra Prasad, the first President of the Indian Republic to come down to visit Presidency College and the Hindu hostel where he used to live. There is a very interesting account of the unorthodox ways in which my father moved in such matter in his book *At Dashak* by his younger colleague, Professor Bhabatosh Datta-

ডঃ যতীশ সেনগুপ্ত একবার একটা বড় কাণ করেছিলেন। কলেজের প্রাত্নন ছাত্র রাজেন্দ্রপ্রসাদ তখন ভারতের প্রথম রাষ্ট্রপতি নির্বাচিত হয়েছেন। অধ্যক্ষ সেনগুপ্ত তাঁকে তাঁর পুরনো কলেজে আসতে আমন্ত্রণ জানালেন। যথারীতি দিল্লির দুপরখানা থেকে চিঠি এল যে রাষ্ট্রপতি খুব ব্যস্ত। ডঃ সেনগুপ্ত এবার সোজা রাজেন্দ্রপ্রসাদকে লিখলেন এবং রাষ্ট্রপতি সোংসাহে আসতে সম্মত হলেন। অনেকদিন ধরে কলেজে গৃহসংস্কার চুনকাম দরজা-জানালা রং করা কিছুই হচ্ছিল না। হঠাৎ পৃত্তিবিভাগ তৎপর হয়ে উঠলো। (পৃঃ ১৫৮)

It was this that paved the way for Dr Rajendra Prasad to come down to inaugurate the centenary celebrations of Presidency College in the summer of 1955. If there was one other event that could come up to the organization ability that he showed on that occasion, was his organization a few years earlier of the Indian Science Congress in Presidency College, which was inaugurated, as usual, by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. It is rather sad that Presidency College records have not registered this major event, as it was brought home to me, when Professor Sukanta Chaudhuri, the finest archivist of the college in recent times, confessed that he did not know that the college had housed an event of such gravity. I came to appreciate the enormity of responsibility that this involved, when I had to organize a fraction of the Indian Science Congress, that is, the Forum on Woman and Science when Jadavpur University hosted the Indian Science Congress in 1995. I also recall, with considerable amused pleasure the support my mother offered in keeping the organizers fed and nourished, not to mention the wonderful performance of Tagore's *Chandalika* that she got Kamala Girls' School, where she was a music teacher, to put up as a cultural programme held in the beautiful pandal on the college grounds.

Founding of the Alumni Association in 1951, likewise, was one of his major efforts at putting the college on the map. I still retain a vivid memory of his overwhelming sense of admiration, when Sri Atul Chandra Gupta, the first President of the Association started it off with a donation of Rs. 10,000/- The sapling he had helped to plant fifty years ago has now spread its branches far and wide.

The years 1950-55, the tenure of my father's Principalship were the golden years of the College, when the College was a-glow with a brilliant crop of the first post-Independence generation of students. Amartya Sen, the late Sukhomoy Chakrabarty and Parthasarathi Gupta in Social Sciences, Amar Bhaduri, Mihir Chaudhuri or Jayanto Ghosh in the Sciences come to mind. Those were years of left idealism among students embodied in Students' Federation politics. My father, who, like many of his generation, was not sympathetic to strikes and other manifestations of Communist student politics, never tilted over to Communist-phobia. For him students were top priority and he would not let government or any other authority come between him and them. He also remained life-long friends with his old schoolmate Sushobhan Sarkar and joined him in his concern over the student-baiting that surfaced in Presidency College in 1967-68. He responded to the large-heartedness of Professor Sarkar who would have been the Principal of the College if it had not been for his communism, and remained a loyal friend.

College Centenary

The breadth of the canvas on which the Centenary of Presidency College was celebrated in 1955 brought to the fore the organizational skill and the team spirit that he could muster. What I saw at close quarters was an ability to delegate responsibility and to get the best out of everyone around himself. Apart from the impressive pandal in the middle of the College grounds, with its decoration of the tree of the college, the event was celebrated throughout the length and breadth of the college. Exhibitions were mounted by all the departments. As a student of Third Year English Honours class, we also put up something under the able guidance of Prof. Amal Bhattacharji.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad inaugurated the august ceremony both in his capacity as an alumnus and the President of the country. Seated just below the level of the main dias, as part of the singing choir, I can still recall the thrill of hearing Dr Rajendra Prasad begin his speech in Bengali with the words "Shreeman Principal"! The only speaker to give his address in Bengali, he created quite a stir. One of his formulations that stuck in my mind (which I used many years later, to write about the College) was

'Presidency College ekti Sadharan College noi'.

A great deal of the expansion that took place later was planned during the tenure of my father. The Derozio Hall and the new wing of the Social Sciences that housed the Advanced Centre of Economics owed something to his vision. However, all accounts of his efforts and achievements as a Principal will remain incomplete, without a mention of Shiva Prasad, the Principal's 'bearer'. My father had introduced him early to our family, and he kept contact with my mother years after my father's tenure as Principal was over. My father was eloquent about the efficiency and quiet dignity of the young man.

It was in the same Physics Lecture Theatre where his birth centenary was celebrated by the Alumni Association that he was given farewell by the College exactly forty-five years earlier, when he left it to take over as Chief Botanist, Botanical Survey of India. Presidency College was the only institution he had served. Attending the farewell as a student of the College I felt deeply moved when he quoted a verse in German and translated it :

It has been so good, it has been so good

It should not have been so good.

And the big strong man choked with tears.

* English (1954-58)