

My First Two Years as a Presidencian

Debajyoti Das*

It had been a horrible time, the last year and a half. The great Calcutta killing, long spells of curfew, stabbing of innocent folk, frequent arsons, uncertain political atmosphere – all had made life a nightmare. But Gandhiji was putting up at Beliaghata and the prospect of a long-cherished peace brightened considerably after his fast for communal amity. And the fifteenth of August had brought a glorious sunshine across the melancholy grey urban sky overhead. The joy as well as the euphoria over the independence, almost as a cloudburst, washed away the communal passion from the city lanes littered with the remains of plunder and riot.

Thus started the unusual academic session, the first one after independence. The communal turmoil, then the long-sought freedom from foreign rule, and thereafter the partition of the country – all delayed the session unusually that year. Any way, I remembered none of the hassles, tensions and anxieties of the preceding months when for the first time as a student, I set my foot on the carriageway leading to the college portico. I felt proud, emotional and superior. The largest group in our class comprised my old classmates of the Hindu School from across the road and all these years, we had been dreaming for this privilege of being Presidencians.

Dr. Qudrat-i-Khuda, the previous Principal, had just left for the East Pakistan. A name-plate, bearing his name as the Professor of Chemistry, continued to be displayed beside the first door opening on the long south corridor of the ground floor of the main building. Beyond that door were the sprawling PG laboratories of the Chemistry department, occupying the entire right wing of the main

building, looking dark, sombre and peaceful, and luring us with the exotic pungent odour of chemicals.

The main staircase was majestic and almost imperial, particularly because it was still to be made ugly by an iron gate in the middle. In the office upstairs, Saral Babu was the head assistant, a pleasant personality and devoted to his sitar at leisure hours – later he joined the Goenka College of Commerce as a Lecturer. Professor Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, a physicist but more eminent as a statistician and endeared to us by his close association with poet Tagore, was our Principal. He used to travel abroad for long spells and on his return, it was almost a routine for him to address all the students of the college in the Physics lecture theatre. I remember seeing Mrs. Rani Mahalanobis for the first time on one such occasion. Dr. Sushobhan Sarkar of the History Department was the Dean of the college and happened to be a brother-in-law of Principal Mahalanobis. Professor Sarkar and Professor Mahmood, both of the History department, were very popular with us though we never had a chance to attend their classes.

Incidentally, sometime during our tenure as ISc students in the college, I got an opportunity to see Mr. Amlan Datta, then a postgraduate student of the college, and Mr. Utpal Dutt of St. Xaviers College compete in an Intercollege Debate meet at the same physics lecture theatre (PLT-1). All the speakers spoke in English. But the conclusive speech by Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray who presided over the meet, was in immaculate Bengali. Mr. Amlan Datta won the first prize, but Mr. Utpal Dutt won both the second prize and our hearts.

Once, in the same physics lecture theatre, Prof. Mahalanobis delivered an emotional

* Alumnus 1947-49, 1950-52 (Physiology)

parting lecture when he relinquished the college post and went to organize the Indian Statistical Institute at Baranagar. Sometime before that, he had already started a Statistics laboratory in a small way along with a small office for the ISI in a ground floor room of the Physics department at the Baker laboratory. But statistics was still to gain its importance among us, the students.

On the first day in my ISc class, the most noteworthy experience was a brilliant opening lecture, with some simple demonstrations, by Dr. Pratul Chandra Rakshit of the Chemistry department. His immaculately white dhoti and kurta, very attractive personality and superb lectures made us his devoted fans. Years later, he presided over a Public Service Commission interview in which I had to appear as a candidate for my appointment in this college.

In those days, one non-teaching staff was always on duty inside the Chemistry lecture theatre during a class. He was to push up and pull down the sliding blackboard whenever required – professors apparently could not or did not undertake the manual work during their lectures. Our chemistry classes were mostly held in an old lecture theatre (since removed) at the north-east end of the first floor of the main building. Its tall windows opened on the College Street in the east and on the Bhavani Dutta Lane in the north. The hammering noise of tram cars, speeding across the College Street-Harrison Road junction, often drowned the voice of the teacher. The wooden gallery cracked when we walked on its age-old planks. Whenever bored (because all teachers even in those days were not good enough to listen to), we just turned our eyes from the dais to the crowd in the street below, to the residents of the YMCA hostel across the lane, or to the fine shack of grey hair of the attendant dozing while waiting for sliding the board.

Next to this lecture theatre was another gallery of the chemistry department. It looked upon the College Street but was quite dark. There, I later attended the organic chemistry

classes of Dr. Ram Gopal Chatterjee as a BSc student. I happen to remember that he looked superb with his fine, silky, perfectly grey hair although he was quite young in those days. I envy him till date for his superbly white hair. He was an excellent teacher, a very learned man both in science and Hindu philosophy, and above all, a very peaceful personality. He was already reputed for his monograph *Ja/* published by Visva-Bharati. He was very gentle and affectionate. Once while passing across our practical class, he noticed that a very small drop of a strongly acidic indicator had fallen on my finger. He was not taking that class. Still he personally washed my finger, applied ointments on it and later searched me out on several occasions to see how that very small wound was healing. I proudly remember his affection everytime I look at the small scar on my finger.

In the second chemistry lecture theatre, Professor Janardan Chakravarty, already famed for his research on Vaishnava literature, took some of our Bengali classes. Bengali was still the major vernacular, not the first language. He called the rolls in English and delivered his lecture in rich and sophisticated Bengali. Out of unseemingly bravado, I replied in Bengali to his roll call one day, and that also in a loud shrill voice. The entire class roared with laughter. I was pulled up gently by Professor Chakravarty and I explained that I thought it proper to respond in Bengali because it was a class on Bengali. He politely told me that he appreciated my point and continued the rest of the roll call in Bengali, winning my heart as well as cutting me down to my proper size. In the eighties, as a member of the PG Faculty Council in Science of the Calcutta University, I felt personally proud to attend a University convocation where both Professor Chakravarty and Professor Rakshit received the best teacher's award.

One of the lecturers of the Bengali department was Dr. Kshudiram Das who has earlier taught us for a spell at the Hindu School. Once in a surprise college test, he

made us write a critical appreciation on Tagore's poem *Sankha*. I do not know how I could draw appreciation from him for my script. Still I could not develop much of a liking for his classes, obviously because of my own fault. Years later, I learnt from him so many things in Bengali literature while we were commuting together between Calcutta and Chinsurah where both of us taught at the Hooghly Mohsin College for some time.

Incidentally, the only other college employee, whom I had known from my school days, was Babban Singh the gatekeeper who was very terrifying for his stern attitude against our trespasses into the precincts of the college. He is long dead now. His son Ramdeo Singh now attends to his duty at the college gate and has been a very close friend of mine.

The Bengali Department was expanded and strengthened during 1948-49. Dr. Devipada Bhattacharya (later, the VC of Rabindra Bharati) and Dr. Haraprasad Mitra joined as lecturers. I liked the classes of the latter more than those of the former. Late in the sixties, Dr. Bhattacharya, then at the Jadavpur University, was my guiding light at the Bangiya Sahitya Parisad where he was the editor of the journal and I was the Assistant Secretary.

We were mortally afraid of Professor K. N. Chakravarty of Mathematics from the very first day – a very good and devoted teacher, he was too hard a task master also. But we were very fond of Prof. Mohini Mohan Kushari who was doing a stint as a lecturer in Mathematics and taught us Algebra for a short spell. A man of very thin physique, an astonishingly high-pitch voice, attractive manners and good teaching ability, we missed him very much when he left us to join the IAS. Dr. Sanat Kumar Bose joined the college in his place. I did not find him particularly attractive as a teacher of Algebra; but then, he was so very gentle, amiable and well-mannered. I served as a teacher in this college under him as the principal in the sixties. He used to reach the

college then before 9.00 a. m. everyday. I used to see him inspecting the college ground and premises every morning without fail. He paused for a couple of minutes to talk with even young teachers like me whenever we met – a personal touch we often miss now.

English was still the first language. We had to appear for 200 marks in each of the science subjects in the ISc examination, but for 250 marks in English. English was taught by a rich galaxy of illustrious teachers. Professor Tarapada Mukherjee, with his shawls set meticulously across the upper part of his chest, taught us the long poem, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I never saw an albatross till much later. But he could effortlessly conjure up the apparition of the albatross soaring overhead with its wings full-stretched and the helpless looks and perched lips of dying mariners cursing their guilty colleague. Professor Somnath Maitra, an aristocrat in his bearings and masterly in his lectures on the One-act plays, had an added attraction for us – we had seen his name mentioned by Tagore in his book *Galpasalpa* published a few years earlier. I still remember him lecturing on the Monkey's paw. It was nearing noontime on a sunny summer day at the second floor classroom high above the pulsating College Street. Still he could make us feel as if the monkey's paw suddenly writhed and moved in our palms and all of us, about a hundred students, sat petrified.

Then there was Professor Subodh Chandra Sengupta, a celebrity already. Quiet, peaceful and without emotion, he spoke in not so loud a voice from his chair in a dimly lit classroom just above the Principal's chamber. I remember fondly even how he pronounced "Dorothy" while discussing a piece on Wordsworth. But he was probably too much of an elite to get as much attention from us, the restless science students, as his knowledge and discourses deserved. And we were never taught by Professor Tarak Nath Sen. But we watched him with high respect and considerable awe when he, as the Professor-

in-charge of the college library, strolled in its reading room cautioning sternly the idle noisy talkers amongst us. Once he examined our scripts for a college examination—none of us could claim as much proficiency in English as was required for escaping from the ignominy of the poorest grade!

Professor Sunit Kumar Indra taught us rhetoric and prosody and took our English tutorial classes as well. He was gentle and encouraging, and we never felt shy to open up in his classes. Professor Indra, Professor Mahmood and several other teachers played tennis regularly at the tennis lawn at one end of the college ground. Professor Indra later became the Principal of the Hooghly Mohsin College where he expired of a cardiac attack at the Principal's apartment.

In the ISc course, we studied the Botany part of Biology at the Botany department in the Baker laboratory. I remember Prof. Sunil Kumar Bhattacharya who started as a Lecturer with us as his first batch of students. Very young, fresh from the university and quite shy, he showed considerable apprehension about our yuletide spirit. Not that he was very wrong because the classes of one of his predecessors, Mr. M. of congenial temperament and high spirit, were frequently punctuated with the intemperate conduct and boisterous uproars of most of the students who believed that they had discovered some humorous aspects in his behaviour. Some of my classmates once contrived to flood the Botany lecture theatre with water by means of a rubber tube. Prof. M. unfortunately slipped as he stepped into the class room – unrestrained and uncivil hilarity in the class, and the class could not be held that day. One of my enterprising friends—he is a very reputed doctor now—used to recite the Mahalaya script of the AIR with considerable gusto from the backbenches, competing with not a little success with the teacher for our attention. Those who wanted to learn the subject, learnt to sit in the first two benches only !

Dr. Satinath Bhaduri took some of our Botany classes. We admired him for his excellent English accent, very impressive lectures and depth of knowledge, but probably more for his well-tailored three-piece suit and tootal ties! Years later, both Professor Bhattacharya and Professor Bhaduri were to become my respected and highly affectionate colleagues for different intervals at the Hooghly Mohsin College.

The college was still without any Zoology department. Prof. Bimal Kumar Chatterjee, then a young lecturer, was the lone teacher of Zoology attached to the Physiology department. In the lecture theatre where I presently take my physiological chemistry classes, we came to attend his class on the very first day of our college life. And I immediately fell in love with Biology, with this lecture theatre and with the second floor verandah adjoining it—an affection I could not overcome all these fortyfive years. We found Prof. Chatterjee a good teacher, devoted and diligent. We liked him so much as to imitate even his slightly nasal intonations. Along with Professor B. C. Kundu of the Botany department, he had authored a fine textbook of Biology, then widely read by the ISc Students. This added to our admiration for him. Anyway, we enjoyed learning in his class and relaxing without inhibition in some of the Botany classes. Both are cherished memories and went to make me a teacher of Biology.

All our Physics theory classes were held in the PLT-1 while our ISc practical Physics classes took place in a laboratory now transformed into the room of the Head of that Department. The laboratory attendant Ramprasad was very friendly and very sick with a pulmonary ailment – he died shortly afterwards. Prof. K. P. Ghosh taught us Newton's laws of motion and his daughter Tuhina (later, an eminent physicist) was one of our only two lady classmates. Professor Purna Chandra Mukherjee and Professor D. P. Acharya were very impressive teachers of Physics. But somehow, we always maintained

our respectful distance from them inspite of our admiration for them. It must be partly due to their "ugly" habit of calling us to the board to solve problems ! We saw Professor R. L. Sen Gupta with admiration for he was already famed for his work on the cloud chamber – I also read under him in the BSc class. Much later, I picked up a dispute with him when I was a member of the Faculty of Science of the University of Burdwan and he was its Dean.

We had a class of about 204 students, divided into two sections, A and B, according to our odd and even Roll Nos. Both girl students, Tuhina Ghosh and Noton Sen, were in the other section and I could never muster courage enough to talk to them. Years later, Noton was commuting to Chandannagar where she was a Medical Officer, sometimes by the same train we took for going to Hooghly. But even then, I did not pick up enough courage to speak to her even once. Both of them were extremely gentle, well-mannered and very reserved.

I should mention at least some of my friends of the ISc class – people should be known by the company they keep. Manoj Pal stood first in the ISc and later became the Director of the Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics. Kshitindra Mohan Naha had a brilliant career and is now a Professor of Geology at IIT, Kharagpur, with international reputation as a geologist. So are Ashoke Kumar Mukherjee, another Professor of Geology at IIT, and Subrata Sinha who recently retired as a Director of the Geological Survey of India. Kamal Kumar Mullick later became a reputed Professor of Medicine at the School of Tropical Medicine while Rathindra Nath Ghosh became a well-known Professor of Gynecology at the NRS Medical College. Pulak Kumar Ghosh became a pioneer physiologist in the field of arid-zone animals and served as the Head of the Physiology Division of the Central Arid-Zone Research Institute at Jodhpur. Nanidhar Kalita who stood first in the Matriculation examination at our time, hailed from Assam and went back to Guwahati to study medicine after his ISc with

us. Supriya Mohan Sengupta invented a geological slide rule and read a paper at the Indian Science Congress session in 1952, while still a student. He is still serving as a Professor of Geology at IIT, Kharagpur. Subhendusekhar Mukhopadhyay ultimately switched over to BA and later did excellent research on Tagore and became the Regional Secretary of the Sahitya Academy in Calcutta. Sujit Kumar Bose had a brilliant career as an Engineer and is at present with the Dasturs. My contemporaries in the IA class include Sankha Ghosh, the reputed poet and literateur, Arun Kumar Dasgupta who stood first in the IA examination and later became the Professor and Chair of English at the Calcutta University and Pradyumna Bhattacharya, a well-known literary worker. I had the privilege to work, along with Manoj Pal, Sankha Ghosh and Pradyumna Bhattacharya, as Assistant Editor of the encyclopedia *Bharatkosh* of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in late sixties and early seventies.

Everything was not gay sunshine. It was a holiday afternoon of 1948. There was a special and poignant announcement over the radio – Gandhiji had been assassinated shortly earlier. My father was a Gandhite and I had not started yet to see differently from my father. I was shocked beyond description. The next morning, my classmate Pulak and myself walked barefoot, probably the only time in our lives, from our residences to the college and to the Eden Hindu Hostel. The whole city was in mourning. The residents of the hostel were on fast, atoning for the heinous crime and shocked with the poignant tragedy. There was no question of classes in the college. We still had many Muslim classmates and we had very excellent relations with them – they equally shared our grief. Later, many of them migrated across the border, evidently because we could not demonstrate to them our ability to provide them with as much confidence and sense of security as they rightly deserved. I happen to remember how a Hindu classmate of ours, belonging to the IA class, was heckled at the

college ground by many others of the same community for his professed RSS leanings. The college atmosphere was charged. Probably the next day after the assassination of Gandhiji, a condolence meeting was held at the college ground – there was no metal enclosure around the ground in those days and the speakers' dais was improvised at the gate of the Baker laboratory while we spread out over the ground. Asoke Nath Sashtri read from the Hindu scriptures in his incomparable voice and intonation. All of us stood overwhelmed with grief. The gloom continued over many days.

Sometimes in 1948, there were prolonged spells of students' strike at the college. Kalyan Sankar Ray was one of the leaders of the Students' Union of the college. The only son of Kiran Sankar Ray, a powerful Congress leader of Bengal, he later became the well-known labour leader in the coal-field belt and died prematurely. We lost many classes. Most

of the students got restive. Ultimately, one day some of the students gate-crashed and rejoined the classes.

There was also a long spell of students' unrest at the Eden Hindu Hostel over certain grievances against the then Hostel superintendent. The latter was subsequently replaced. Peace prevailed in the hostel thereafter.

Seated at the college portico one holiday evening with the majestic flight of stairs in front of us, Pulak asked me what I would like to be in future. I said that I would like to climb those stairs carrying a load of books, as a teacher of this college. Little did I know at the time what I had in store for me. Meanwhile, I left the college in 1949 for my first stint elsewhere – I went to join the MBBS classes at the R G Kar Medical College, not knowing that I would return shortly to the fold of my cherished alma mater. But that story should be told some other day.