

## Of the Presidency College

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I left the Presidency College in 1940 with a poor honours degree in history; the final result contradicted my class performance. But I belonged to a good year. Satyajit Ray read English in those honours years. I did not see much of him though his best friend was Anil Gupta, a fine musicologist, a grandson of Lord S. P. Sinha, and later in life a close friend of mine till his last day. Pratap Chunder read history with me – later a scholar - politician – far better known in his later years for his scholarship. Amalesh Tripathi read Economics along with Manilal Banerjee, who was the finest scholar among us – very resolutely pursued by Taslimuddin Ahmed, who in later years in East Pakistan showed great moral courage – to whom we all should be respectful. Amiya Basu, a distinguished barrister, at an early age would have, had he not been killed by demon rum, been amongst the best jurists in India. Nripen Sen was with us; he after leaving the ITC early in life got the top assignments in several public sector companies. There was a tall fellow called Protap Roy whom I got to know later in life.

We had to finish our honours course in two years. In consequence the teachers and the class did not have to go very deep into learning history. The standard of paper setting was understandably shallow. One could get a first with less reading than what tempted me. Not all the examiners except Zacharia or Sushovan Sarkar appreciated depth in answer papers.

Fortunately for the later generations it is now a three-year course in which ambitious students have a better chance to prove their worth. In my year not one got a first class in history. Oxbridge scholars like Zacharia, Sarkar, or Principal B. M. Sen should have urged the university for lengthening the course much earlier. The possible obstacle might have been the family of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee (I request former Chief Justice Chittatosh Mukherjee, my junior in age, but far more superior in scholarship and achievement, not to take my archery amiss. The arrow is not meant for him. The academic role of the family, with exceptions, is summed up by Professor P. C. Ghosh in his plain rebuke to Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee “You have got all your father’s faults – none of his qualities”).

I believe joining my college now is not easy. In my year I just brought my certified papers from Dacca Board of Secondary Education, paid certain fees to the bursar and walked into my class. When my son applied for admission he was tested in an essay paper by the then head of the department. What now the rules are, or the custom is, I do not know.

There were not much social festivities in the College. There were rare festive occasions for the entire college. Once, I remember, there was a steamer party for the whole college – financed by the fees from the participants. I did not join because I had no money; my family in Dacca were not rich enough to finance me to keep up with the Presidency College Jones. But I believe Principal B. M. Sen while on sail sang action songs in Tagore. I am sorry I missed it. The main social encounters were through individual knowing each other. My string of friends consisted of Pratap Chunder for “Shanibarar Baithak” (purported to be a “Cultural” gathering), Amalesh Tripathi for hospitality, Manilal for intellectual exercise and to Roys of Behala for free lifts. One of my closest friends now is Protap Roy of Chemistry whom I hardly knew in the College days. I remembered him, though, because he passed our history room for his Chemistry gallery. There was a group of affluent young men, who played cricket. To them I with my bookish friends were objects of disdain.

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Let us now get down to business which for the College was the education bestowed on us by the teachers. The gurus in the Presidency College were well paid. They were specially selected for the College and spent their entire career there. Some IES (Indian Educational Service) with substantial salaries were sometimes posted outside, away from Kolkata to pull up faltering senior colleges. One such was Kuruvilla Zacharia, a great Oxford Scholar in History. I discovered that in 1943 when a couple of days after I had joined the district as a probationer Zacharia knocked at my door a couple of hundred yards from the Hooghly Mohsin College of which he was the principal. I had not merely heard of him but had actually seen him, when he read to the History men a paper on "The Athenian Finances during the Peloponnesian War". I was deeply embarrassed. It is I who should have called on him. He put me at ease and there was thereafter regular visits by me to the College lawns on Sundays (if it did not rain) for tea and a slice of excellent cake.

Professor D. N. Sen was our head of the department. His scholarship was not evident. But his concern for his pupils was very great. He retired one year before our finals but in other years, before the finish, he hired a phaeton for the day to look up every student reading for the final examination. He was succeeded by Dr. U. N. Ghoshal a notable scholar in Ancient Indian History. He read the Maurya History with us. (Personality I learnt more of Kautilya and Megasthenes after the College but that is what it should be). Professor Sen read Medieval European History with us. After he left, a Cambridge graduate called Mullik came to teach us. I could not make any sense of the Papacy versus the Empires to the Carolingian on the Merovingians until I read a note given to my friend Nripen by Sushovan Sarkar (he used to coach students on special occasions). He explained the European Middle Ages basing his analysis on the Marxian Historical Materialism.

Professor Sarkar himself read with us Modern European History and Greek History. He was the only teacher who took some care of us. He had for us periodical tests and marked the papers. He took tutorial essays and graded them. He was totally a Marxian scholar. He should have taken Marxian analysis much further while teaching us. He did not, probably fearing he was under watch. That is perhaps why he did not lecture on the great historical role played by Marx in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. Ricardian economy was left out, as was the development of Marxian philosophy.

His teaching of the Greek History also was inadequate that was because (I found out later) he was not a military historian. And Thucydides was totally a military historian.

But on the whole he was a great teacher. I learnt from him the art of historical analysis based on Historical Materialism. Later, with maturity I realized that Professor Sarkar did not guide us into Marxism. The CPI then was a banned party. Like other secret societies this party spread its gospel in study groups. It was Bhowani Sen who introduced us to Dialectical Materialism. The Marxian venture ended later, when I realized that in the sorites of Marxian logic the ultimate conclusion was wrong.

Back to the College again. We had a number of pass subjects. Of them English got the greatest attention. The head of the department when we started was Prof. P. C. Ghosh. He was a great scholar and a great teacher. He read with us, the pass students, only Shakespeare. The syllabus consisted of two plays – one each year. But because Professor Ghosh was leaving early in 1939, he resolved to read the plays with us in one year – the plays being "As You Like It" and "Othello". I shall never forget his reading of Othello. He found himself lacking on the first day in his emotion and mood to recite the verses on Life, Jealousy and Death in the final scene. He left the class room. Next day he came back with the heroic black Venetian looming large in his eye. Out came the hissing self flagellating words – "Like a base Indian / who threw a pearl away / Richer than / all his tribe" Many years

later I heard those hissing words uttered by Ronald Colman in a film. But Othello poetry continued till the suicide. The day ended and ended Professor Ghosh's duty to us. English had a rich faculty for it. There was Somnath Moitra (of much private means) dressed in silk (his dhoti was very fine) who read Golden Treasury with us. Professor Bannerji read the Bible not with us but at us. Unfortunately I never got a chance to read with Tarak Sen who turned out later to be a great teacher.

Professor Tarapada Mukherjee took our class – I forget what we read with him.

But Subodh Sengupta, impeded by his heavy Vikrampur accent in English was a great scholar. He read with us an English novel "Far From the Madding Crowd"; we were not impressed. But his doctorate on Shaw deterred the mutineers. Much later when I had retired – and he was so many years older – I discovered how deep was his scholarship. To prove a literary argument I wanted to read Browning and went to him at his residence. He asked me to come a week later. I realized why, he wanted to polish up his Browning. What he told me did not prove my arguments. The matter was dropped. But later, during my many visits we talked about Shaw, Caesar, Cleopatra. He always laughingly accused me of ethnographic bias in my writings. I was not unduly upset. His respect for his masters (especially P. C. Ghosh) was profound; his concern for the generations of his students was immense. Professor Sengupta was almost a P. C. Ghosh less the latter's personality.

Dr. J. C. Sinha was our teacher in Economics. But we were left to the care of "Bachcha" Ghoshal, a London B. Sc. He somehow got on our nerves one day; we walked out of his class room. He could have had all of us punished, by speaking to the Principal but he did not. From the next day both the sides resumed their respect for each other and all was well.

This was the college where Subhash Chandra Bose, and his fellow students beat up Professor Oaten in 1916. The same college had to be policed by my armed men when I was the Commissioner of Police. But the guards were under great tension. When a bomb burst near the picket, the officer in charge of Jorasanko decided to search the college. The Principal rightly dismissed the classes. As the students came down the steps with their hands up (a sight which disgusted me) they chanted "Hari Bol", the chant for the crematorium. My son and two of his fellow students might have been louder than the others. They were arrested and taken to the Police Station in a Van. A Deputy Commissioner came and set them free – after an appropriate incarceration. But leaving the college to seek for jobs in the mercantile Calcutta or with the Government, I pondered : what had the college given me? It had given me so much. I was not a "finished" human being. There was so much more to learn. But the teacher pointed out the road. The task of educating myself remained my responsibility. Later I had to declaim, like Horatio Bottomley "Gentlemen I have come from the University of Life".