

OUR ALMA MATER

RADHARANJAN DHAR, M.A.*

WHAT an irresistible attraction our century-old College—our alma mater—has for us, wherever we stay, whatever career we pursue, and whatever is our age! In the imperishable words of our unforgettable Professor H. M. Percival, “In imagination often and in dreams sometimes, it comes back” to us. We do not wish to analyse it or give it a body and a name; we are quite content as long as it has that unique pulling power—pulling sometimes father and son together, perhaps even father, son and grandson simultaneously.

Fifty-three years ago I joined the College in the third year class and yet it appears so fresh as if it was only the other day. First and foremost, stands out the outstanding professor of all times—Professor Percival, and I seem to see him ascending the stairs in straight and stately gait carrying at least a dozen books in his arms—an unerring embodiment of an all-absorbing devotion to his only love in life—“work in teaching”. To read any subject with him was privileged education but not to read Shakespeare with him was a misfortune. Though he taught us “Richard II” and “As You Like It”, it was a pity we could not have “King Lear” with him for it was taken up by another professor at his own insistence. Yet when we collected Professor Percival’s notes from older students who had the good fortune of reading “King Lear” with him, we could know what a difference it meant. He also taught us Burke’s “French Revolution”, and perhaps to cope with time, his method was different with Burke, commenting on difficult passages or words “10 lines below” or “12 lines below”; yet we ultimately found that nothing was left unexplained. One thing we particularly noticed that at times

he made notes on the margin of his book in pencil, indicating that he was either adding to his notes or revising them. He always kept his mind open and was ready to accept new suggestions even from his students. But the criterion was always reason—not the ponderous weight of any name, however big he might be. I remember a personal story in this connection. I was reading Rushton’s “Shakespeare’s Euphuism” in our Library and found a different interpretation given there from what Professor Percival gave us in the class. I mentioned that fact in a letter to him, and when at the end of his lecture he asked “Roll No....” to see him in the Professor’s Room, what a trepidation it was for me to meet him there. Yet his generous, almost parental, encouragement of this ‘spirit of investigation’ removed my nervousness once for all. But so far as the interpretation of the passage was concerned, he firmly rejected Mr. Rushton’s interpretation and gave his reasons for doing so. Since then I met and wrote to him more than once. Once I also went to his place and was kindly shown round his big library with genuine pride and with remarks like “These rows represent Literature”, “This is my collection of History”, “This of Economics and Politics”. I realised in my heart of hearts that day what an ideal literary recluse he was with books here, books there, and books everywhere in his place which was a veritable and precious library which he ultimately presented to the then youngest University in India—The Panjab University. One of our great ex-alumni, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, rightly said as recently as 1958—“His students felt they had been brought before an ancient *Rishi* resurrected as a *Yogi*, absorbed in the pursuit of Truth, dead to pleasure and fame..... With no natural eloquence and no charm of voice, he made himself the most impressive teacher

* Alumnus: 1910-14.

of his time by the solid content of his lectures..... Whenever a new subject had to be taught or an examiner was wanted for the highest degree, the authorities turned to Mr. Percival and he never failed to respond". I was lucky to have Prof. Percival just for a year (1910-11) but after some years, in 1915, I had the most pleasant surprise in my student's life when in a letter to the Principal of a college recommending me for the post of a Professor of English, Prof. P. C. Ghosh, wrote, among other things, of a more personal relation between Prof. Percival and my humble self than I had any idea of till then. Though Prof. Percival was kind to his students, he had a more awe-inspiring presence than that of a free mixer, and he hardly gave himself away except perhaps to his dearest students like Prof. P. C. Ghosh.

Then, I seem to see Principal H. R. James in his best form and bearing while reading his impressive report and requesting Lord Carmichael to open the Science Laboratory in the presence of the élite of Bengal under a richly decorated *shamiana* inside the Eden Hindu Hostel. Those were no easy times and there was always some trouble going and he had to administer things tactfully and firmly. In connection with a tactless remark made by an otherwise good professor in our class, he had to ask him to express regret, and in those days an expression of regret by a European at the request of another European was a rather unusual thing. There was a police-search on political grounds in one room in the Eden Hindu Hostel, and though it was made by the highest officer of the C.I.D., Principal James insisted that it should be done in his presence. He was always anxious to perpetuate the old traditions of the College, and as he sponsored the idea of the College Register and College Magazine, he also requested me as Secretary of the Hostel Library to enquire and write a short note on the Eden Hindu Hostel for the proposed College Magazine. I remember having seen Sir Gurudas Banerjee, ex-Judge, Calcutta High Court, in this connection, and he not only gave me some important informa-

tion, he also visibly felt very proud of the College. I left my note, "Eden Hindu Hostel—Its Past and Present", with the Principal when I left the College in 1914.

Of the galaxy of great professors, I seem to be seeing Sir J. C. Bose—already one of the world's recognized scientists—riding in his brougham, absorbed in watching a plant in front of him on his way to the College. Speaking of another great scientist, I seem not only to see Sir P. C. Ray in his many familiar ways and works, I seem also to hear his words ringing in my ears. Within a few days of my joining the College, I accompanied a student of his—later a D.Sc.—a man of my district—to his place almost with the devoted attitude of approaching a temple; yet how in a moment he made the whole atmosphere so homely, saying—"Both of you come from Sylhet, why don't you smell of orange?" While he was addressing a farewell meeting for a student who was going to England and later became an I.C.S., he said in all seriousness—"Whatever else you become, be an Indian first and an Indian last". As Gurudev said, like "The One" of the Upanishad, he became "many" in his students. Some of his particular students (Dr. N. R. Dhar, Sir J. C. Ghosh and Dr. J. N. Mukherjee) used to reside in the same ward with me in the Eden Hindu Hostel, and we knew that not only he taught them in the class and the laboratory, he also discussed things during his walks with them. Like Mr. Percival, he was a bachelor, but his students formed his family of scientists—he was so much at home and familiar with them.

Then I seem to see and hear Prof. M. Ghosh, elder brother of the great saint Arabinda Ghosh, giving us a poet's interpretation of other poets like Matthew Arnold and Swinburne and speaking more or less like an inspired dreamer—not to his students directly but to "some ideal audience" as a commentator remarked.

Above all, I seem to see and hear our

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most popular professor—Prof. P. C. Ghosh, our friend, guide and philosopher in all matters and in all branches of English Literature and Language. The doors of his house were always open to his students and we cannot forget his anxiety and pleasure in discussing literary matters there during Sundays and holidays. Soon we learnt from him how proud he felt of his and our great professor, Prof. Percival, and how he pulled the leg of another professor who at first used to look askance at Prof. Percival's popularity but ultimately came round and admitted to him—"I also consult your Encyclopædia" (meaning Prof. Percival). Like Prof. Percival, Prof. Ghosh also gave himself up entirely to his 'work in teaching'. As he himself put it years after—"As a student, then as a teacher, I have been connected with this College for 40 years..... To serve it was my earliest dream, to work for it has ever been my chief passion."

I don't blush to confess, however, that the charming memories associated with our college are not always related to serious study but at times also to some-serio-comic or innocently funny incidents in particular class or classes which I dare not mention lest some like myself may still be in the land of the living.

To read in the Presidency College and not to be able to reside in the Eden Hindu Hostel was my misfortune in my first year in this College, but from the second year I joined the Hostel through the kind intercession of Shri Sarada Charan Mitra, ex-Judge, Calcutta High Court, who used to look upon me as one of his grand-children. Like Sir Gurudas Banerji, he also felt very proud of this College.

Like the College, its hostel has also a great attraction for us, and though I became a boarder about 52 years ago, I still seem to see our exclusive confectioner 'Banamali' selling his delicacies while vociferously boasting to new boarders like myself, that all judges and high officials of Bengal, Behar, Orissa and Assam had been his customers and pay-

masters, our little supervisor of the Dining Hall—'Kesto'—being ever on the run to attend to different and even simultaneous calls, and our gate-keeper 'Nandalal' and ward-servants 'Mahendra' and 'Bangshi' being ever anxious to oblige and look after us. The Hostel's academic atmosphere and corporate life—with its own library and reading room and its elected Committees and secretaries, its Kavi-Sammilani (Poet's Union) with no less a person than Mahamahopadhyaya Haraprasad Sastri as its permanent Chairman and an elected Committee and secretaries, its Debating societies and Unions with elected secretaries, and its magazines with elected editors—still loom large before me.

As in the College; so in its hostel, things were not always entirely academic and we not only at times indulged in innocent fun, we also awarded prizes for it in different wards. As Secretary and Editor of our ward's Debating Society ('Friends' Union') and Magazine ('Recreation') I still gratefully remember that in connection with our Annual Celebration all whom we approached were uniformly kind in making it such a success—including Shri Dinendranath Tagore, Shri Soumyendranath Tagore (then a school-student) and Shri Brajendranath Ganguli who played on the piano and sang some songs, Shri U. Ray and Ostad Misra who played on violin and *esraj*, and Sir J. C. Bose who presided and Lady Bose who distributed prizes. One of its most sensational competitions was 'Hostel-Diet-Eating-Competition' in which one was easily the first and was still continuing till we considered it safe to stop. Similarly another prize was given in another ward for an innocent but clever mischief as a result of which every one found one of his slippers exchanged with another of a different room in the ward.

I feel so proud to remember that Prof. Percival, even after he had retired, gladly sent his autographed photo for the Hostel Library with a nice letter to me as its Secretary, conveying his "best wishes" for his former pupils whom "he" tried to serve as a teacher

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to the best of his powers and opportunities, and that I received a prize for my first sonnet in my life from Shri Sarada Charan Mitra who presided over the Annual Meeting of our Kavi-Sammilani and three other prizes for my short story in Bengali (later published in 'Bharatbarsha'), for a humorous essay and for the 'Orange-in-the-tubrace' from the hands of Lady Bose, in later life one of my grand-aunts-in-law.

But the proudest day in my life was when

in 1936 I came to have my only son admitted in my old college and hostel, had unstinted support from all concerned, and met with two pleasant surprises—one of my old class and hostel-mates appearing as the Superintendent of the hostel, and one of our old ward-servants, 'Bangshi', all in grey hair, crying out in joy at seeing me with my son after about 22 years. What was the surprise of surprises and a matter of great pride to me, was that Prof. P. C. Ghosh was still in the College to teach my son as he taught me.

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