

# Presidency College (1910-1914)

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EVERY student generally has a fond recollection of his College days and I am no exception. But in my case there are special reasons for remembering with pleasure my association with the Presidency College (1910—1914). Those were stirring times. The College had a number of eminent professors and there were brilliant students whose name and fame spread far and wide in later years.

Among the professors of the College, I may mention the names of Principal H. R. James, Professor H. M. Percival, Professor Manmohan Ghosh, Professor Benoyendranath Sen, Professor Coyajee, Dr. J. C. Bose, Dr. P. C. Ray, Professors W. C. Wordsworth, J. W. Holme and many others.

Mr. James had a great love for the College and the students. As there was no chance for him to meet the students outside the classroom, he used to arrange meetings of the students in the old hall of the Calcutta University Institute and deliver addresses to them. His first address was delivered on 20th August, 1908. I was not present to hear this address. He addressed the students on three other occasions, on 18th July 1910, 16th December 1910 and 23rd July 1912. He was very anxious for effecting improvements in the College, structural, academic and other wise, and in his address to the students on the 16th December 1910, he gave the students some idea of what the Presidency College would look like if his schemes were approved. This is the picture placed before the students: "As we approach the College we shall get a clear view through the present compound to a large field beyond the site of what was once the Transit Room of the Observatory—a large field 120 yards long by 100 yds. wide. On

the south side of this, beyond the Hare School will be the new Laboratory Block. In the corner will be the new Gymnasium. Along the West side of the ground will be a new hostel on an ample scale. On the North, will be a Principal's house and quarters for three professors and between these residences will be the College Hall—a large building, capable of seating 1200, a worthy embodiment of the corporate life of the College and not unworthy of the imperial greatness with which this college is connected". Unfortunately Mr. James's scheme could not be carried out in full but at any rate it shows the feelings of Mr. James for the College.

It is not generally known that Mr. James incurred the displeasure of the authorities for his independent views. His report recommending affiliation in History to Jagannath College, Dacca, offended Mr. Sharp, Secretary of the Education Department. The Syndicate supported Mr. James and wrote to Mr. Sharp, "First Class men are, on the whole, to be preferred for the posts of professors in Colleges; but the Syndicate hold that it is neither generally recommendable nor at present actually feasible to exclude second class men from those appointments altogether . . . experience moreover in India no less in other countries, amply shows that it is not always the men standing highest in examination list who make the most successful and inspiring teachers" (Calcutta University Minutes—Part II page 1914). Mr. James's position was slightly embarrassing as he was a Government servant and could not publicly defend himself against the attack of Mr. Sharp. In the Senate meeting on 21.3.1914 Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee, then Vice-Chancellor, read out the following written statement of Mr. James: "It is sometimes difficult for members of the Syndicate who happen also to be servants of Government in the technical

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\*Alumnus (1910-14).

sense to discharge duties like those which Mr. Stephen and myself undertook. I think it will be well for the Senate to consider whether it will be possible for such persons to undertake duties of the kind at the request of the Syndicate if they are subjected to rebuke and while they are not in a position to reply themselves the Senate lets the indignity pass without remonstrance" (Calcutta University Minutes—Part II page 712).

It was, during the time of Mr. James that a room in the Eden Hindu Hostel was searched on 21.11.1913. Mr. James insisted that the search should be conducted in his presence and the Police chief had to agree.

Mr. James was anxious to meet the students but as there was little opportunity for doing so, he, as already stated, used to deliver occasional addresses and his addresses were subsequently published by S. K. Lahiri and Company. He attended many functions organised by students and was present in many Ward anniversaries of the Eden Hindu Hostel and on his initiative the students of the College in 1912, were entertained by the Professors. When the Elliot Shield returned to Presidency College after a temporary absence, Mr. James presented the College with a glass case for exhibiting the shield and other trophies. He started the College Calendar. I do not know if it still exists. He laid the foundation for the Presidency College Magazine. His sympathy for Indian aspirations may be noticed in his book, "Education and Statesmanship".

Mr. H. M. Percival was more or less a legend, well-known for encyclopaedic knowledge and as an authority on Shakespeare. His tall and stalwart figure caught the eye of everybody. On his retirement, Lord Hardinge paid this well deserved tribute to him: "It will not be easy to fill the place vacated by Mr. Percival. For more than thirty one years he was a professor in the Presidency College giving of his best in knowledge to successive generations of students, while as a Syndic and member of various Boards of studies he

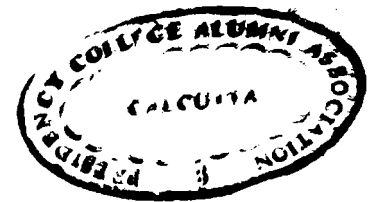
rendered service of exceptional merit and brought to bear a judgment which was never swayed by any other than academic consideration."

Mr. M. Ghosh was another well known professor of our time. Himself a poet of no mean order, he was very much at home in lecturing on poets and poetry. But he was not very comfortable in lecturing on Tennyson. He was however very impressive when he took our classes on Wordsworth, Shelley, Matthew Arnold. I remembered that when Rabindranath got his Nobel prize on 14.11.1913, we asked Mr. Ghosh to give his views on this epoch-making event. Mr. Ghosh said that he was highly pleased that Rabindranath was appreciated in Europe even in translation. He then made a wry face, shrugged his shoulders and observed that it was a pity that Rabindranath would have to rub shoulders with Rudyard Kipling (who had got the Nobel Prize a few years earlier and for whom Mr. Ghosh had no admiration). J. C. Bose and P. C. Ray had already made their mark and were known all over India. Shri Benoyendra Nath Sen, was a saintly man and the author of "Intellectual Ideals". Sree Prafulla Chandra Ghosh was then a junior professor but he had already made his mark. There were many other eminent professors but I do not mention their names here.

I said the times were stirring. Indeed they were. The Partition agitation was in full swing. The College Square (alas now no longer a place for public meetings) resounded with speeches by eminent politicians of the country and ultimately after the visit of the King-Emperor the Partition was annulled. I still remember the night when a telegram was received in the Sanjivani office announcing the annulment of the Partition. We rushed to the College Square and found Surendra Nath Banerjee lecturing to a group of persons. The I.F.A. Shield was won by an Indian team for the first time in 1911 and one of the members of the winning team was a student of the Presidency College. The Crown Prince of

Germany came to Calcutta in his warship "Leipzig" and armed with a letter from our Principal we went to the Prinsep Ghat and boarded the ship and had a look round. In 1913 there was a very serious flood in Damodar causing great hardship and misery, and the students of our College went to Burdwan and contributed their share in relieving distress.

In 1913 also came a first Handly Page aeroplane and we all rushed to the maidan to see it. The Baker Laboratory was opened on 2.9.13 and in that connection a meeting was held in the Eden Hindu Hostel and it was addressed by Mr. James and Sir Debaprasad Sarbadhikary. Many other interesting incidents flash back on my memory but I think I must stop here.



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