

# Presidency College Foundation Day

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I felt unequal to the honour when Principal Mukherjee invited me to preside over this joyous occasion.\*\* Not that I still do not. I, however, relented when told that Sri Somnath Chatterjee, a distinguished alumnus of this great institution, was going to be the Chief Guest. He and his associates now hold this State's future in the palm of their hands, even as generations of Presidency College alumni in the past contributed to the enrichment not only of Bengal but also of India in diverse fields of intellectual and national awakening.

Having been associated in a small way with this State's development in the first two Five-Year Plan periods, I was anxious to hear straight from the horse's mouth how his team proposes to take a great leap forward in the concluding decade of this century, when a new worldview and philosophy of development seeks to replace the thinking and action of the fifties. I also thought, this should give me an opportunity of submitting to him and this august gathering what must be bothering thousands of citizens like me at this hour.

The crucial element for the sustenance of all development activity for material and moral progress still remains the relentless pursuit of knowledge and skill for improving the quality of life and enrichment of human resources, to which this college has contributed so richly in the last two centuries. Perhaps all the more so now than ever before. That way this college deserves to be an important forum for this significant moment in the life of our people.

If anything, we are almost at the point of embarrassment of riches, overwhelmed by the offers of investment from every corner of the globe. It will now mostly depend upon how our human capital, especially dedication, work ethic and per unit productivity, and our development infrastructure, will measure up to these generous offers. It is unfortunate that we were caught napping for lack of concrete, carefully prepared specific project proposals when captains of industry and finance rushed in about a couple of years ago

from all corners of India with offers to promote the Haldia region, whose infrastructure Dr. B. C. Roy had laid down with such circumspection four decades ago. We had also the equally unfortunate experience of Japanese specialists visiting Calcutta with offers of expertise and bilateral aid for the improvement of Calcutta's traffic circulation, only to beat a prompt retreat. Similar has been our recent experience with the British *Concorde* mission. They gave some of our spokesmen a joyride over the Bay of Bengal, eventually to land in New Delhi where they apparently found metal more attractive. We have just been rewarded with photographs of the latest British Head of Mission chuckling heartily over a group of bustee children warming their hands around an open fire on a street pavement, but not over any concrete joint industrial venture yet. We have heard the Singapore Premier bemoaning Calcutta's lack of industrial and civic infrastructure and work ethic. We certainly cannot afford any more to lose by our default the generous offers of assistance broached at the CII and the Indian Science Congress Association meetings.

It seems a coincidence that, on the very day that Principal Mukherjee extended his invitation to me, *The Statesman* reprinted the first of two articles by William Rees-Mogg on how Britain is bracing herself to meet the challenges of the twentyfirst century. What Rees-Mogg wrote revived the memory of a conversation I had had with Dr. B. C. Roy in 1956.

The Central Government had just issued a decree in 1956 of freight equalisation of coal and steel and pig iron whereby West Bengal lost its locational advantage in industries dependent upon these raw materials. As West Bengal's Industries Secretary, I put in my protest to Dr. B. C. Roy for having submitted to this decree. Dr. Roy said :

"Asok, you will agree that with my record in India's freedom struggle I cannot stand in the way of India's prosperity as a whole to safeguard my State's fortuitous advantage. Besides, you will remember, it is you who in your 1951 Census Report on West Bengal observed that the Bengali's strength lies in his brains more than in his brawn, and what West

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Bengal needs now is post-World-War-II technology and a whole array of new industries which will rely on upgraded knowledge and skills in high-value adding, high-productivity-per-worker plants. What the British left behind was largely post-World-War-I junk, dependent on human muscle power—fashioning steel with the hammer and shoving coal. This explains, as you observed, why most of our millhands are illiterate non-Bengalis. We have got to replace all this old rusty iron as fast as we can by factories which will feed on knowledge, intelligence and new skills, for which the Bengali has aptitude. This is the reason why I am strengthening the network of primary education, water supply and health services in rural areas; irrigation and extensive road networks as rural infrastructure to arouse and draw out Bengal's rural talent; plans for accelerating electricity generation and obtaining more water from Farakka. A State that offers abundance of electricity and water will not lack prospective investors at its doorstep.

"This is the reason why I am going in for IIT at Kharagpur, the Jadavpur University of Science and Technology, the new Science Association laboratories, the Glass and Ceramics Institute, the Scientific Instruments Centre, improvement of the University Science College with new disciplines added to it, the Bose Institute, the Shibpur Engineering College, the Engineering Research Institute at Durgapur, the new Kalyani University of Agriculture, the Animal Husbandry Centre at Haringhata and a wide range of technological research and training institutes on leather, textiles and ceramics, while lending power to the elbow of a whole range of chemical, pharmaceutical, biotechnical industries which will be the new giants in the coming decades. I am setting up training institutions for shopfloor operatives and supervisors to attract high school students to high-wage vocations.

"I am setting up regional universities at Midnapore, Burdwan, Kalyani and North Bengal to educate young people at their doorsteps in the districts so that they will make proper use of our new rural infrastructure and link up with our metropolitan and industrial regions.

"Jnan Ghosh, Triguna Sen, Jnan Mukherjee, Sikha, Atma Ram, Atul Ray and Dey (Durgapur), Sanyal in the new Management

Institute attached to Calcutta University, are setting up the right pedagogical and management models and recruiting competent teachers from wherever they can. I have asked Meghnad Saha to set up his new atomic centre in Salt Lake. He and Satyen Bose are our lobbies at the Lok and Rajya Sabhas in these areas.

"You people are building up brand new state-of-the-art factories in Durgapur and Kalyani for new raw materials, a whole new range of upstream and downstream products, new product and processing technologies, so that we can replace most of our low-wage, low-value adding units by high-wage, high-value adding products to enable Bengal to hold its own in India's industrial world in spite of the loss of its locational advantage."

This made me recall the famous argument between Igor Strumilin, the Soviet Statistician, and Lenin around 1919-20. Lenin was bent on investing all the savings he could lay his hands upon, on his favourite GOELRO Electrification Plan. Strumilin placed before Lenin a whole array of his statistical survey findings around Kiev in Ukraine to establish that even as little as four years of structured institutional primary education in the traditional three R's substantially improved productivity per millhand. This persuaded Lenin to split up his GOELRO allocation. As a result, the Soviet Union's level of literacy surpassed that of Europe and the USA in the next ten years, which largely accounted for the Soviet Union's record in rapid industrialization. Universal primary education also served as a stepping stone to higher studies in science and technology, not to speak of the humanities. Nearer home, Bharatratna Visweswaraya's investment on electrification and technical and scientific education in Mysore State as long back as the thirties paved the way for the eminence of Mysore, and particularly of Bangalore region as a perfect illustration of Hecksher-Ohlin's model of comparative advantage.

On the other hand, although we wrote the attainment of universal primary education within ten years as a goal into our Constitution in 1950, all political parties, irrespective of their different hues, are still determined to subvert it on the unstated ground that universal institutional primary education will thwart what Marx called "extraction of surplus value at below subsistence cost" from the

overwhelmingly large masses of our population below the poverty line. We are all too aware of the enormous waste and deception that is being perpetrated in the name of universal informal literacy and the damage it has done to the entire primary school and health delivery systems in West Bengal. This has prevented rural West Bengal from making optimum use of the rural infrastructure initiated in the fifties to maintain a steady supply of educated talent to the urban areas of the State. The sad level of education among the overwhelming tides of rural migrants into our urban areas in the last two decades will substantiate my point.

Our Chief Guest this evening is much more aware than any of us what has happened in the last two decades to our schools, colleges and research institutions—the deterioration that has taken place in the recruitment and nourishing of good teachers; the rot that has set in in their accountability, work ethic and even personal integrity; the desecration that has overtaken our institutions of higher learning and research for lack of funds and resources. He does not need to be told how our centres of excellence have suffered from neglect and even deliberate assault. How like the three leopards in T.S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*, assailers have "fed to satiety on (Presidency College's) legs, its heart, its liver and that which had been contained in the hollow round of its skull." I have cited our college as an instance of things that have happened elsewhere. It is far more difficult to build up the right gurus than recruit bright students. It is the constant supply of good Bengali gene that still sustains West Bengal's reputation in the academic world. What is more, it is a happy augury that the flowering of the Bengali gene is no more limited to the so-called upper castes, but

is now abundant among castes and classes still labelled backward. This flowering is evident not only in the humanities, sciences and technologies, but also in the creative arts, athletics and other fields. I have travelled all over India since 1950 and visited important U.S. universities, and I know in what esteem the Presidency College alumni are still held in most centres of excellence.

What is even more regrettable is that the political leadership throughout India, and not in this State alone, is relatively indifferent to education and research. The dedications of our Vice-Chancellors and academic Doctors have still sustained welcome efforts despite impediments.

Meanwhile, as the Singapore Premier observed the other day at the CII meetings, since West Bengal could not make adequate use of its human capital and even finance capital, much of these two capitals, especially the human capital, is now employed in nourishing other States of India and countries abroad.

The Premier of Singapore observed that it may take another ten to fifteen years of determined efforts to enable West Bengal to make its mark in industrial development. In the life of a people, if one looks back on the fifties and early sixties, this may not be too big a span after all. Still, we have to remember that finance capital always takes second place to human capital. Unless West Bengal retrieves its primacy in human capital, even large and frequent shots of investment capital and stock in Bengal's arm will hardly avail. We shall continue to look up to our distinguished alumnus in this regard, who is now at the helm of this State's material and moral progress. ■