

Presidency College, in my memory lane

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In 1961-64, Presidency College was everything that a young undergraduate could dream of, a fine tuned engine of inspiration. Presidency College had an ambiance of tranquil beauty discretely shielding a sense of militant exuberance. We all wanted to be Einstein and Lenin rolled into one. And there was no death of mentors. Looking back it was already world class without ever being indiscreet or any way loud.

The Principal, an above average mathematician, was a little absent minded and unusually bad with the English language. Spelling was beyond his 'symbols'. Once he was explaining to a visitor, the beauty of chrysanthemums. The somewhat bewildered visitor asked him to spell the name of the flower. With a straight face, the legend goes, he said, 'R-o-s-e, rose'.

The debates at the Physics Lecture Theatre of the Baker Laboratory were a treat and the great Tirthankar Mukherjee, always at the last bench, used to tease the speakers mercilessly. One of my colleagues, now long dead, got some dates of an event wrong. Tirthankar immediately interjected in a very loud voice, 'failed in history pass,' followed by his shrill hyena-like laughter. The speaker got so upset that he excused himself and left. Then came Professor Ashin Dasgupta's (the distinguished historian) turn. Tirthankar did not try his prank again.

Some of our teachers were world class, they were living legends in their own right. Tarak Sen's English Honours classes used to extend into late evening. He was the only person who could read and write Greek, so it was said. Sukhomoy Chakraborty, with his penetrating eyes, could see the future of economics in complex mathematical equations. Our own physics laboratory boasted of Amal Kumar Raychaudhuri, who had already established the 'Raychaudhuri Equation', known throughout the world. Always clad in dhuti-punjabi, Amal Babu was invited to go to The United States. We had sleepless nights, trying to figure out what exactly he would wear. Shyamal Sengupta was almost a philosopher. At the end of our third year we were already committed physicists to be, along with a strong devotion to communism. Hugely confident and exuberant, we were allready to conquer the whole world.

Cricket certainly was a very important part of our lives. I was generally referred to as the "Taru" batsman, very unreliable. The 'sixers' were very dear to my heart. During those painful adolescent years, attracting the admiration of the fairer sex was certainly more relevant than scoring a century. There was one memorable exception: the season's final match against St. Xavier's College. My God, compared to our frail anatomy, they were well built and smarter. We were losing very badly; I arrived to bat at number four, with a sinking heart. After facing very sharp bowling, with balls moving with the speed of light (so it seemed) on the seventh or so ball, I had a snick and was caught. Sixth sense prevailed and I stood exactly where I was, making no movement towards the pavilion. I still recall Manmohan Agarwal, a very large man (Economics Honours), being the umpire; he just stood there like a stone wall with his hands firmly clasped behind his back. After a high pitched decibel exchange, I was allowed to continue, I began to see every moment of the movement of the same very fast balls. I went up to seventy-five or so! I was 'Not out', but we were still way below the score of St. Xavier's. We saved the day ultimately.

The third year came and we were feverishly planning our future. The Naxal Movement started, with one of the brightest and best in our class formulating the theoretical side of the Movement.

We finally had a farewell party and the great Rajen Sengupta, Head of the Department, was asked to say a few words. Rajen Sengupta was a student of P.M.S. Blackett, the Nobel Laureate and cloud chamber wizard, at Imperial College, London. He was a man of very few words, 'how.....ever eef you want to be a pheesicist, remember you will staarve' with his heavy nasal voice. Well, Rajen Babu, you are long gone, we did 'staarve' a bit, but because of people like you we were never 'staarved' of ideas!

Presidency College at the impressionable age of sixteen was an inspiration that has been an enduring legacy for the last half a century of my life, the memory does not fade, it gets brighter with time.