

# Presidency College, Calcutta: An Unfinished History

BENJAMIN ZACHARIAH  
SUBHAS RANJAN CHAKRABORTY  
RAJAT KANTA RAY

## Introduction

The history of Presidency College of Bengal, and of its earlier *avatar*, the Hindu College, is intimately entwined with the intellectual life of Bengal and India. Coming into being in the early years of what came to be called the 'Bengal Renaissance', and later, by extension, the 'Indian Renaissance', the Hindu College was the earliest major experiment in colonial higher education; and Presidency College became the model institution for the propagation of 'secular' Western learning. Education was at the core of the imperial mission, and the Hindu College and its successor often found themselves at the centre of the debates surrounding education. Although the college itself was not a site of contention in the most intense educational debates of its early times, the contest between Orientalist and Anglicist views on education in India – it was established in order to fill the need, expressed by a number of Calcutta's leading 'native' notables, for 'an institution for

giving a liberal education to the children of the members of the Hindu community' – its peculiar relationship in its early years with the two model institutions of Orientalist learning, the Sanskrit College and the Calcutta Madrasa, reflected what was then, and largely remained, the inner tension of colonial rule in its attitude to Indian society: to transform or not to transform. This was also largely to become the central dilemma of the rising Indian middle class, and of their nationalism: to be, or not to be, transformed; or to what degree to be transformed, by 'Western' education and its concomitant values and cultural norms. Hindu College, later Presidency College, provided the first major stage for debate on this theme.

The history of the college – and the writing of that history (inasmuch as the most articulate histories are those written of and by elites, the history of Hindu College – Presidency College is the history of 'modern' Bengal) – reflects, therefore, the profound ambivalence with which the

Indian professional middle class, and the *bhadralok* in particular, approach their educational and intellectual heritage: colonial, elitist, Orientalist (in the Saidian sense), but at the same time in some sense, universal. This was no unconscious state: the mostly gentle, occasionally sharp, self-parody of the *bhadralok* recognising his strange and hybrid identity is an old tradition, again with strong connections with the college. At the same time, the quest for the universal principles in an education system emerging out of colonial rule never quite receded; and science, economics, statistics and development intimately related to the great professed ideals of the modern Indian nation, had strong roots in Presidency College. Intellectuals from Presidency College, in residence or in diaspora, still seem to hold on to some of these universals in an age of fragmented identities, divided selves and multiplying sub-nationalisms, perhaps logically: to deny universal validity to certain basic principles of their intellectual training – the applicability of standards of rationality to the knowable world – would undermine the framework of 'post-enlightenment modernity' on which they stand.

The college's elite orientation has always been too apparent to be denied, despite the lack of respectability attached to the term in certain periods of consciously cultivated plebeian values. An aristocracy of wealth in its early days, 'wealthy *baboos*' inviting the scorn of missionaries, later moving closer to its ideal of a meritocracy of education through the establishment of various means of financial assistance to

promising students, incorporating previously excluded groups as it went along, it remained an institution rather well-looked-after by the government of India and later the government of Bengal – until quite recently, with the Left Front Government's aversion to 'elite education' making itself felt. Even then, it fared better than other colleges. It has sought intellectually to escape these boundaries; only occasionally have groups from the college sought to bridge the gap between thought and action and reach out across the barriers imposed by the college's elitism. These moments, though, have been exceptional moments; in less exceptional

expected to operate. The college's 'primary object' was defined as 'the tuition of the sons of respectable Hindus in the English and Indian languages, and in the literature and science of Europe and Asia'; admission of pupils was to be 'at the discretion of the Managers of the institution', and the college was to consist of 'a school (*pathshala*) and an academy (*maha pathshala*) – the former to be established immediately, the latter as soon as may be practicable.'

The college had in its early days a precarious and somewhat nomadic existence: classes began at a rented house belonging to

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times, those associated with the college have been content to engage in quiet intellectual activity and to communicate amongst themselves or with those of their peers in the outside world who could understand the idiom they were accustomed to use.

#### **The earlier Avatar: Hindu College, 1817-1854**

The institution established on Monday, 20 January, 1817, took some time to grow into its rather grandiose designation of 'college', and certainly had no pretensions to being the pioneering institution of higher education it became. The original rules provide an indication of the rather limited parameters within which it was

Gorachand Bysack at Garanhatta, Chitpore Road, shifted in January 1818 to another, and a year later to another in the same locality, known as 'Feringhee Kamal Bose's House'; shifted to Bowbazar, and then, in May, 1827, to the new building constructed for the Sanskrit College, two wings of which were earmarked for the Hindu College. Finances were never sound; an experiment, from January 1819, with the abolition of fees and depending on voluntary contributions and the interest on the amount originally subscribed, had to be abandoned in 1824, the firm of Joseph Baretto and Sons, with which the original funds had been invested, went into liquidation, and on David Hare's advice, Hindu College had

to apply for financial assistance from the government, and the managers petitioned that the college be removed to the vicinity of the Sanskrit College, which was about to be founded, so that the two could share lectures, the use of scientific apparatus and so on. The Government agreed, and a grant was also provided to the college.

The price to be paid for increased government involvement was a loss of the formal independence enjoyed by 'respectable' Hindus in the management of what they saw as their institution.

#### **The identity of Presidency College**

'The Presidency College of Bengal' started working as a government college on 15 June, 1855, open to all communities, abandoning the Hindu exclusivism of its predecessor institution. Muslims were now admitted to the college, as were other communities. Chittaranjan Das and Fazlul Haq both studied at Presidency College in the second half of the nineteenth century; until the end of the century, however, Muslim presence on the campus was weak. In the period 1857-1884, the community-wise break-up of students read: Hindu 828; Muslim 11; European/Eurasian 4. While there was no bar to the admission of lower castes, dining facilities were separate in the Eden Hindu Hostel which came up later. In 1874, when the college shifted to the present campus, it had on its staff 19 members of whom no less than 15 were European, the other four being Hindu. The first Muslim teacher of the college, Syed Ameer Ali, joined the college as Lecturer in Law in 1875. He

soon distinguished himself as a pioneer of Muslim awakening. Delawar Hosaen Ahmed, who has been identified by intellectual historians of Bangladesh as the harbinger of modern rationalist thought among the Bengali Muslims (Ameer Ali belonged to the Urdu-speaking Muslim élite), graduated from the college in 1861, the first among the Muslim graduates of Calcutta University. Delawar Hosaen Ahmed was, in his day, a deputy magistrate.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Nabin Chandra Sen, graduates of the first two batches of the Calcutta University (established in 1857), could rise no higher than the positions of deputy magistrate and government pleader, respectively, despite their brilliance. However, four other early students broke the barrier and joined the 'celestials': Satyendra Nath Tagore (the first Indian to join the ICS), Romesh Chunder Dutt (author of the famous *Economic History of India*), Bihari Lal Gupta, and Ananda Ram Barua (a distinguished Assamese litterateur). Another early graduate of the college, Syed Hosain Bilgrami, rose high as an educationist in Hyderabad. Saligram Singh became a well-known public figure in Bihar.

### Presidency College and its Environs

The college shifted to its present campus on 31 March, 1874, under the initiative of its distinguished Principal J. Sutcliffe. The main building with its grand staircase and the turret clock (donated by Nafarchandra Palchaudhuri) was inaugurated. A new hostel, named Eden Hindu Hostel, was opened in 1887. The Baker Laboratory

building to house the science laboratories was completed in 1913. An astronomical observatory block was added to the main building in 1929. An extension of the Baker Laboratory building was made in 1953 to accommodate the expanded Zoology department. New constructions since then include a new building to house the Economics and Political Science departments and the Chemistry department. The Derozio Hall, an auditorium for the college for which a need was long felt, was inaugurated in 1967. The latest addition is the Netaji Subhas Block which came up in the north western corner of the play-ground. This was formally inaugurated in 1995. A girls' hostel, built with finance made available by the Planning Commission, was completed the same year. It was formally inaugurated in 1996.

The physical expansion of the college kept pace with its changing environs. The College Street, on which the college is situated, has always been a fascinating locality housing numerous schools, colleges, and bookshops. The old book shops which have been an essential part of the college's traditions, can still reveal a gem or two (*Michelet's History of France*, for example). Quite understandably, the old laid-back ambience of the last century or the earlier part of this century is now lost. Many of the old landmarks like Jnan Babur Cabin (famous for its delicate snacks) or Paragon (a watering hole for the connoisseur of iced sharbat in all conceivable flavours) are now defunct. The Coffee House was the haunt of the students in the 1950s and the 1960s, when the college did not have a canteen

('...heady discussions in the coffee house drugged by the aroma of the excellent coffee and phenomenal doses of the boys' cigarette fumes which we girls passively inhaled'). It provided a home to lonesome poets, budding historians, scientists in the making with the same warmth as the firebrand revolutionaries of the late 1960s. It has since been superseded by the college canteen, presided over by Pramodda, while old-timers still remember the war-time canteen once run by Ray Mashai.

### The Teaching Tradition

'He was neither a fluent nor an eloquent speaker,' the *Oriental Magazine* said of Derozio, 'but the little that he said contained bone and sinew, and furnished a large stock of accurate information'. If Tarak Nath Sen belonged to this austere tradition, his master Prafulla Chandra Ghosh would fit better with what Macaulay had told Capt. Richardson: 'I may forget everything about India, but your reading of Shakespeare, never.'

Nearly half the teachers of the Hindu College were Indians. By contrast the Presidency College, which the government filled with Oxbridge-trained European staff belonging to the Imperial Education Service, had few Indian teachers in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Presidency College inherited from the parent body three Indian teachers who developed basic texts for the new type of education that was then being imparted in the schools: Peary Charan Sircar produced the basic primer of the English language, the *First Book of Reading*, Ram Chandra Mitter

prepared in 1850, a map of Europe in Bengali character and this was lithographed at the government press; and Prasanna Kumar Sarvadikari 'the ingenious mathematician who transplanted the arithmetic and algebra of Europe into the vernacular of Bengal'.

The new breed that transformed the character of the institution as it made the transition from the Hindu to the Presidency College was the all-white Imperial/Indian Education Service. Theirs was the power, but some also had the glory: James Sutcliffe, E.B. Cowell, C.H. Tawney, Alfred W. Croft, Alexander Padlar, William Booth or Hugh William McCann (on whose sudden death his pupils, headed by the union secretary Ashutosh Mookerjea, erected a plaque in his memory in the library).

The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw the coming of the first batch of acclaimed Indian Professors: H.M. Percival (an Anglo-Indian), Bipin Vehary Gupta, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Prafulla Chandra Ray, Prasanna Kumar Ray, Benoyendra Nath Sen, Haraprasad Sashtri and Mammojan Ghosh, to name a few. All of them were condemned, at least initially, to the Provincial Education Service, victims of a system of racial discrimination. Harinath De, a versatile linguist, was the first Indian to be appointed directly to the Indian Education Service at the turn of the century. He, however, did not serve his old college for more than a couple of years (1904-06). As the new century progressed, more Indians were appointed to the IES: Jahangir Coyjee, Kuruvila Zachariah,

Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis. Their worthy and illustrious colleagues like Subodh Chandra Mahalanobis, Hem Chandra Dasgupta, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, Srikumar Banerjee were, however, still in the Provincial Service. It is indeed very strange that an eminent scholar like Charuchandra Bhattacharya was a Demonstrator in the department of physics. Shortly after the First World War, Bhupati Mohan Sen and Surendra Nath Dasgupta joined the distinguished group of Indian teachers. A new generation of outstanding Indian teachers now entered the Senior Common Room: Kules Chandra Kar, Taher Razwi, Jogish Chandra Sinha, Muhammad Qudrat-I-Khuda, Jyotirmoy Ghosh, Susobhan Chandra Sarkar, Sobodh Chandra Sengupta, U.N. Ghosal, Tarak Nath Sen, Gaurinath Bhattacharya (Sastri), Gopinath Bhattacharya, Pratul Chandra Rakshit. The college tradition of breeding its outstanding teachers in its classrooms was well established by the mid-twentieth century. ('One's brilliant pupils in due time becoming one's valued colleagues.')

The tradition continued through the 1950s and 1960s when former pupils acquired eminence as brilliant teachers. Any list of such names can at best be illustrative and not exhaustive. Among the more prominent were Ashin Dasgupta, Amalendu Tripathi, Dilip Kumar Biswas (History), Sukhomoy Chakraborty, Dipak Banerjee, Mihir Rakshit, Amiya Kumar Bagchi (Economics), Amal Bhattacharya, Sailendra Nath Sen, Arun Dasgupta, Sukanta Chaudhuri (English), Mihir Chaudhuri (Chemistry), Sivatosh Mukherjee (Zoology), Satyesh

Chakraborty (Geography), Amal Kumar Raychaudhuri, and many others.

## Students and Politics

Presidency College's student politics, despite the occasional attention it has received, has been, with one major exception, relatively quiet. Other incidents have attracted attention as well; but the crowning moment for student politics at Presidency College, both in the organisational sense as well as in terms of its significance, was the period now referred to as the 'Naxal' period – a term which was given with retrospective effect from 1966, when the beginnings of the radical left movement which later claimed that name were being felt at the college. A history of Presidency College student politics therefore needs to foreground that period; if this hasn't been done already, it is mainly due to the reticences the memories involved still provoke. Nevertheless, there were other periods in the College's history when student politics created a certain impact; it is these periods which this section seeks to address.

The Derozians were a recognisable group comprising students of the Hindu College. It is with this group, or in its wider appellation of Young Bengal, that organised student activity, it is possible to argue, started. Such activities centered round the different debating societies like the Academic Association or The Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge. Many students of the Hindu College were recognised as rebels against social and religious orthodoxy and, quite often, such rebellions

took the form of puerile excesses like throwing bones of cows into the houses of orthodox Hindu gentlemen. For many, the youthful non-conformism did not go beyond imbibing alcoholic drinks and eating beef. Their confused intellectual growing up did reveal complexities which they did not appreciate. Many of them later settled down with comfortable jobs in the middle levels of colonial bureaucracy. Yet their rebellion was not without a point. What was important was the identity of 'Hindu College students', an identity that was further cemented

'Presidency College Union' was founded on 8 September, 1877, by J.V.S. Pope, Professor of English Literature, Presidency College, 'to root out the feeling of disunion prevalent among students and to unite them as fellow-workers in the cause of self-improvement'. Thus the first attempt to provide an official forum to the students, though not on democratic lines, came from the teachers. The union held only three meetings during the year, but of its activities nothing is known. There was a conspicuous lack of interest, it would seem, among the students

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after the conversion of the Hindu College to Presidency College.

Conflict between the students and the college authorities was not unknown – Bipin Chandra Pal narrates an incident. An English professor offended the dignity of a student by asking him to stand like a schoolboy in front of the class. This led to a demonstration of the first and second year classes and even an assault upon the professor. The boy responsible for the assault was expelled.

Another teacher caused a students' strike by 'scoffing at the temerity of Surendra Nath Banerjea and other Indians' during the Ilbert Bill controversy. This led to students' demonstrations in Calcutta and Dacca.

The students, however, were yet to be formally organised. It is interesting to note that a

and the union almost died a natural death. However, some first year and third year students gave it a new lease of life. The most eminent of these students was Ashutosh Mookerjea. A meeting was held on 25th February, 1882, and the students present resolved not to let die the noble object of the founder-president Prof. Pope. Prof. H.M. Percival was requested to preside at the meeting and he readily agreed. In July, a half-yearly meeting was held with Mr. Bellet, the Principal in the chair. For some time a lively interest in the union was taken both by the students and some teachers, including the Principal. It would seem that the union was little more than a debating society and appeared to have emulated the example set by the Derozians. A special meeting of the union was held on 1 July, 1884, to

condole the death of Dr McCann. After the meeting a subscription list was opened to collect funds to raise a suitable memorial for Dr. McCann.

No records of the functioning of the union from 1888 to 1904 are available. However, an attempt to revive the college union seems to have taken place about 1905 when Dr. P.K. Ray, the first Indian Principal of the college, drew up a set of union rules. Nothing very substantial emerged out of this attempt, though the union did function for some time and elected as secretary Rajendra Prasad, who later became the first President of the Indian republic.

In 1914, Principal H.R. James set up a Consultative Committee of student representatives. The Committee was however suspended in 1916 on account of disturbances in the college.

## 1928-29

Students in Bengal came into mainstream nationalist politics from the time of the Swadeshi movement, though Presidency College students were not prominent in that period. The first organised students' association in Bengal was formed in 1924, with Acharya P.C. Ray – of Swadeshi and Bengal Chemical fame and a teacher in the Chemistry department of Presidency College – as its first chairman. Among the society's professed aims were to foster friendship between students of different colleges; to organise Volunteer Corps with students of different colleges to serve needy people and students in all spheres of life; to start a students' home for needy students; to start education lectures with the help of eminent scholars of the country; to arrange financial assistance to

poor student. This organisation lasted up to 1928.

The All Bengal Students' Association gave a call to the students of Calcutta to join the *hartal* on the occasion of the Simon Commission visit on 3 February, 1928. Pramod Ghosal was elected secretary of the college union in 1927; on 20 January, 1928, the College's Foundation Day, he gave a speech touching on the country's aspirations for freedom in the course of which he mentioned Subhas Bose (who had been expelled following the Oaten incident) as one of the distinguished ex-students of the college; the function also witnessed the singing of *Bande Mataram* and the wearing of tricolour badges symbolic of the Congress flag. The college authorities called on Ghosal to explain his conduct; he was suspended for refusing to recant. Following this, in February 1928, there was significant unrest in the college, followed by police action.

On the night of 3 February, according to information received by Principal H.E. Stapleton, Subhas Chandra Bose visited the Hindu Hostel to organise a strike against the visit of Simon Commission to India. Stapleton injudiciously called the DPI, E.F. Oaten, to inspect the happenings in the college on 4 February. This angered the students who remembered the Oaten incident quite well. The police beat up some students during the strike and Pramod Ghosal sustained injuries. The Principal is said to have been quite indifferent when excited students informed him of Ghosal's injuries. The situation took an ugly turn when a body of infuriated students started throwing stones into the Principal's room. That he escaped with his life on that day was attributed by the *Prabasi* magazine to the timely intervention of the head of the department of philosophy, Surendranath Dasgupta. According to Stapleton's report

to the government, he left the college premises in the car of Jehangir Coyajee (the head of the department of economics). Pramod Ghosal was expelled from the college.

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*Benjamin Zachariah  
Alumnus (History/1990-94,  
Teacher since November 2012)*

*Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty  
Alumnus (History/1960-66,  
Teacher since 1988)*

*Rajat Kanta Ray  
Alumnus (History/1963-67,  
Teacher 1974-2006,  
Emeritus since 2006)*