

PRESIDENCY COLLEGE PLUS



AMITAVA BOSE

Presidency University is hardly ever not in the news these days. That is not surprising. After all it is founded upon the tremendous reputation of Presidency College. Presidency College is not just a college. It is a symbol of Bengal's considerable achievements in the intellectual world and, in a wider sense, it is a symbol of man's undying love of learning.

The transformation of the college into a university is an aspiration that we have been hearing about since our student days. That was in the nineteen sixties. Then as now, College Street was very much alive – alive and kicking – with noisy slogans against injustice and exploitation. Coffee House was alive too. Moreover 'The hills were alive with the sound of music'. The walls of the Albert Hall, which is where Coffee House is located, once reverberated with the massive music of the redoubtable 'Aftab-e-Mousiqui' Ustad Faiyaz Khan. That was decades before the nineteen sixties. By the time we came on the scene the music that played inside Coffee House was utterly different; in fact it can hardly be called the same animal. Yet for those of us who were alive then, the riotous rumble inside the hall did sound like music. What made it music was the delightful and not so discordant sound of friendly debates and disagreements. The discussion was not invariably about global politics. There were local concerns too. It was widely agreed that it is high time Presidency College obtained a degree awarding status. One way to look at Presidency University is to see in it the fulfilment of that demand for a degree awarding status.

It is worth discussing the implications of viewing Presidency University in this particular manner. After all this appears to be the majority point of view and evidently the 'official' one.

The old demand for a degree awarding status was equally a demand for autonomy for the college. The demand for autonomy gave vent to the belief, widely held, that the syllabus of Calcutta University was out of line with the exceptional intellectual resources possessed by the college. Calcutta University has a very extensive hinterland but what sense does it make to lump Presidency College with the rest? Presidency College deserved to be treated differently. Presidency College is where the best faculty engages with the best students. It cannot be denied that Presidency College has always been the symbol of a conviction, the conviction that intellectual excellence requires exclusivity.

So there is continuity rather than discontinuity in the conception of Presidency University. Most of us look to the

future with the hope that it will be worthy of the past. The hope is that the future will produce luminaries just as the past did. The corridors of PU will once again echo with the footfall of giants in the same way that the corridors of PC did in the past with legendary teachers such as Prafulla Chandra Roy and Tarak Nath Sen or equally legendary students such as Amartya Sen and Sukhamoy Chakravarty.

The history of the college is an inspiration for all of us, an inspiration that possesses the power to drive the creation of another magnificent institution. But glorious though it certainly was, the past should not serve as the model on which the future is sought to be created.

Are the ideals that propelled the minds of the best students in the past the ideals that move the minds of the brightest students of today? One often hears that the brightest students today are no longer seriously interested in knowledge per se, and that fewer and fewer are keen to join the academic world. While there is no doubt that the absolute numbers keen to enter academics are woefully small, is it all that clear that the *percentage* of students who wish to enter academics is dwindling? Speaking of the Economics Department at Presidency College, this does not seem to fit the facts – although it is dangerous to take one discipline at a time since there is obsolescence in some areas and the emergence of new fields. Most of our friends from my batch selected other than academic fields as careers. If one chooses to focus on a larger sample and include other good colleges of the city, the share of academic careers in the total would have been insignificant I am sure. Enlarging the sample to include other colleges is entirely legitimate in view of the fact that the size of intake at PC has not kept pace with growth in the pool of admission-seeking bright students. Thus many students who are unable to join PC today – and are entering other good colleges – should have been able to do so in the past.

The point is not that students today are any less bright than they used to be earlier or that they are uninterested in acquiring new knowledge. In fact, for all we know, the opposite may well be the case. What however is incontrovertible is this: students pursue higher education for objectives that are substantially different from what used to be the case thirty or forty years ago – not to mention the early decades of the twentieth century. What is the reason for this change?

Much of the change in student objectives has been driven by the need felt by the world of business for a better alignment between their recruitment aims and the output of institutions of higher education. Most students who enter our colleges and universities today do so with a clear financial motive. They look forward to an education that promises higher incomes in the future. For many it is a choice between zero income and something positive. An insignificant number join our colleges and universities in order to do a PhD. However one look at the syllabus of virtually any discipline would induce the belief that every student at the receiving end of the syllabus will go on to do research in the discipline and end up as a teacher.

The content of the curriculum has changed over the years; no doubt about that. However the basic *character* of the syllabus in most disciplines has not changed. The ideals that drove higher education in the past were essentially those of *internal* embellishment of the academic world and the respective disciplines. It was taken for granted that the graduates would in any case obtain comfortable employment and, moreover, an educational institution should not care about 'jobs'. In the past such an attitude did not really compromise the job prospects outside academics. This is because the number of job seekers was small and recruitment in industry was based on the assumption that higher education would effectively filter out the 'best' given dependable entry requirements in colleges and universities. The entry requirements were determined according to academic performance. Academic performance was taken to be a reliable signal of certain desirable general qualities – such as capacity for hard work, basic intelligence, result-oriented motivation, and so on. The functional aspect of the output of higher education was less important than these general qualities as also the 'cultural' aspect associated with being better educated. This kind of model served the corporate ends because the commercial world was rather different. The level of competitiveness in the market was relatively small. The Indian industrial sector was characterized by monopolies, much of it policy-induced as a result of licensing and import control. The specific needs of a particular business function were best learnt on the job itself – this is perhaps still the case – and the extra time required for that was quite affordable. Your competitor was not breathing down your neck.

On a macro scale the model of higher education was pyramidal in structure with the vertex at the top, consisting of the intellectual elite, serving as a catalyst of overall societal development. This may be characterized as the hermitage model, a Brahminical way of learning – for all bright students, regardless of whether one likes it or not, regardless of whether one needs it or not. It is best to recognize that the days of the hermitage model are decisively over.

Presidency College of the past is a good example of the hermitage model. The college no longer fits the hermitage model in all respects. This appears to be one reason why many are convinced that the standards have declined – which may be the case or it may not be the case across the board. Those convinced that standards have declined because of

lapses from the hermitage model are desperately hoping that PU would restore PC to its former glory by rectifying these lapses. In other words PU would help purify PC by adhering to the hermitage model.

Actually the question is not whether PC has been strictly adhering to the hermitage model. The problem is that but for the students – the group most affected – virtually everybody else in Bengal expects PC to follow the hermitage model. Most of us alumni expect this to be the case, so do parents, so do policy makers.

For a new university in a new world this kind of expectation is clearly a severe restriction. It is an expectation that is based, as I have just argued, on an obsolete model. This is not what can be described as excitingly forward-looking thinking. At bottom the issue is one of attitudes and outlook. It is not hard to see why students from Bengal are opting to seek higher education in other states of the country. The principal reason for the exodus may have less to do with quality of teaching than with attitudes; attitudes about the purpose of higher education and about what kind of career is 'decent' for the children. The emigration of students may have more to do with a kind of rebellion against the implicit belief of elders in the so-called purity of higher education, in the belief of parents and older teachers that higher education must be kept poles apart from materialistic aims. It is, in a larger sense, a rebellion of the young against the cloistered modes of thinking of the elders.

The shaping of attitudes in general and of attitudes on the nexus between education and society in particular, is a prime responsibility of educational institutions. The evidence of continuing belief in the PC model among large sections of opinion makers in Bengal shows how tremendously successful the PC of the past had been in influencing the preferences of an entire society. However there is a cruel irony in this: The closer one remains to the great ideals that made the PC of the past such a monumental success, the less the chances that PU has of creating something new and relevant for contemporary society. To be a source of attraction for prospective students and teachers PU must have a model that is in principle free from the compulsion to abide by the hermitage model.

But can PU really shake PC off and start with academically a clean slate? There is a real dilemma here. The trouble is that PU has evolved from the idea that PC should get a degree awarding status.

To the extent that Presidency *University* is simply a generalization of the old demand that Presidency *College* be granted autonomy, PU does not have the choice of starting with a clean slate. It is hard to describe PU as a new university given this background. A really new university for Bengal should be one that is able to effect a change in the Bengali mind-set. But if PU is merely PC blown up, then the task of getting PU started is essentially an exercise in *incremental* effort, rather than an exercise in changing attitudes of an entire community.

The incremental character of the exercise does not make it trivial by any means, but it is incremental nonetheless. Moreover the exercise is not easy simply because it is incremental; on the contrary it is likely to be that much harder because of irreversible constraints imposed by history, constraints that are sometimes affectionately referred to as 'historical baggage'. But hard though the effort may be, the output of that effort is not going to be earthshakingly great simply because the quantum of effort was large. The problem is that because it is essentially PC extended or 'PC-plus' as we may say, PU will have to bear the cross of an obsolete model of learning.

This is emphatically not to suggest that PU replaces the PC model by one that assumes students are driven by greed and the demands of material prosperity. However what is taken as a 'given', that students still have the same motivation as that of their ancestors, has to be discarded.

May be the best thing would have been to start from scratch and think simply of what would be the ideal new university for this part of the world. May be the best thing would have been to pattern the university on the lines of the best in North America but with a distinctive thrust. May be it would have been best to give the new university a physically attractive and generous appearance, a proper campus in a university town. May be it would have been better to change the affiliation of PC – from CU to PU. May be the new PU would have a number of colleges and 'schools' – such as a school for technology, a school for the social sciences, a medical school, a music school, a school for the performing arts. May be.

At least in the matter of faculty recruitment there is a remarkably determined effort to break away from the prison of incremental quantitative change to which PU appears to have been doomed. The Chief Minister has set up a 'mentor group' consisting of extremely distinguished Presidency alumni drawn from diverse disciplines. The PU 'mentor group' has been emphasizing the importance setting global standards in teaching and research. It seems quite natural to seek out 'global' faculty in order to achieve this goal. It does not seem reasonable to expect American, German, Japanese or Chinese scholars to come rushing in but there appears to be hope that PC alumni stationed in some of the best institutions in the world would in fact find the prospect of joining PU a good one to consider – provided the offer is an appropriate one. Let us keep our fingers crossed.

What is the mission of the new PU? It stands to reason that if a scholar from a top class institution decides to join PU that cannot be because of material gain. Leaving aside emotional ties – a matter of the past – it should be evident that one requires an inspiring enough mission. What is that mission?

About the Author

Economics (1964-67)

Bose then studied at the Delhi School of Economics, completing his M.A. in 1969. After a year as a tutor in the Delhi School, Bose went to the University of Rochester in 1970 for doctoral studies, completing his Ph.D. in Economics in 1974.

Bose joined IIM Calcutta as a faculty member in 1974 and has remained with that institution ever since. Bose has held part-time or visiting positions in several universities. He was Director of IIM Calcutta during 1997-2002. He has always remained in touch with the Presidency Economics Department and believes he owes his choice of an academic life to his teachers in Presidency College.
