

Presidency College : Tradition Trend and Prospect

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The long journey of our alma mater from 1817 to 1992, first as Hindu College and then as Presidency College, extends over a period of great historical significance. Moreover, values, reality, experience, thinking, philosophy, ethics and academics have merged together in a speedy evolutionary process of this institution, reaching it to its present socio-academic status in the last decade of the present century.

Raj Narayan Basu once remarked that Presidency College was the higher developed form of Hindu College because it had emerged with the students, teachers and textbooks (syllabi et al) of Hindu College. Therefore, these two must be regarded as one institution with continuity. Hindu alias Presidency College does not need an identification certificate. In fact, whatever is said and to whichever detail regarding Presidency College, much more remains untold. That is why the media of any kind finds it difficult at any time to check the temptation to publicise anything about this institution. But it is unfortunate that newspaper reports or other media comments sometimes fail to reflect the reality and suffer from lapses like subjectivity, misinformation and noninformation. Information, either half true or wrong, should be abjurable and should not be communicated as these tend to create confusion among the alumni of the college, and among the academicians and intelligentsia in general.

The establishment of this institution was the outcome of the desire of the East India Company rulers to consolidate the very basis of their administration. For this purpose, they decided to establish their cultural and

intellectual hegemony over the conquered race. The Fort William College was established in 1801 to train the administrators. This was the beginning which culminated in the establishment of the Hindu alias Presidency College, but in a wider sense of the term. In fact, the spread of Western education in India centered around this institution. The foreign rulers used this College as the medium of imparting Western education in order to create a class trained in Western values and culture. Their contention was that this class could easily be utilised as a formal support base in favour of the administration. At the same time, a conscious effort and the process for making the education system rational had been continuing. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was one of the pioneers of this conscious effort. Open mind, free thinking, inquisitive attitude and consciousness, which emerged during this period, gradually turned into a tradition and inspired the future development of this College. Side by side, reactionary forces did have their strong foothold here; this was borne out by the forced resignation, or truly an expulsion, of Derozio from this College. In fact, parochialism very often hindered the progress of this institution. But progressive thinking succeeded from time to time in removing such impediments to a great extent.

Within a few years of its establishment, majority students of this College started attaining high positions in different academic examinations. In 1855, the total number of students were 132. But the high standard of teaching inevitably attracted students in far greater numbers in subsequent years. This resulted in enhancing the number of students by about four times in the next decade itself.

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During this period, there had been four streams of education in this college : General stream; Medical; Law; Engineering. One fact worth mentioning is that only four to five percent of its students belonged to the wealthy sections of society at this time.

From 1870 onwards, personalities like Dwarakanath Mitra (later Bar-at-Law), Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay (poet), Nabinchandra Sen (poet), Romesh Chunder Dutt (later ICS and novelist) and Ananda Mohan Basu (Wrangler) passed from this college. They were taught by great teachers like Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose, Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, Haraprasad Shastri and P.C. Ghosh. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, higher education and research started in Presidency College with the organisation of several laboratories.

Presidency College kept itself beyond the purview of the Swadeshi movement against the partition of Bengal, which is regarded as the first nationalist movement in Bengal and India. Inspite of personal inclinations of students towards the movement, no stir was discernible in the college and among the students. It is thus evident that the students of Presidency College were not prepared to forfeit the right to higher education and allied opportunities at any cost. But as the recipients of rational education, the opposite behaviour was natural for them. Six decades later, how the anti-establishment attitude of Presidency College drew the students into open movements both inside and outside the college, will be discussed later.

Under Morle-Minto Reforms Act 1909, education was placed as a Transferred Subject under a minister responsible to the legislature. In 1910, a governing body was constituted with government officials and non-government personalities, thereby curbing the powers of the Principal of the college. From the centenary year (1917) of Hindu College, post-graduate teaching went totally into the

hands of the University of Calcutta. Thus, the sphere of teaching in Presidency College started shrinking.

During the days of anti-imperialist struggles, no protest movement worth mention was organised among the students of Presidency College. Of course, one may very well cite the episode of Subhas Chandra Bose and Professor Otten. But with the highest regard for Subhas Chandra's patriotism, courage and nationalist spirit, it can probably be considered as a personal protest. No significant student movement emerged from this issue in the College. During the Second World War, co-education was introduced in 1944 in Presidency College. Since then and also after the post-independence period, female students increasingly utilised the academic opportunity extended to them. As a result, the number of recipients of higher education increased to a great extent.

From the seventh decade of this century, a definite change was conspicuous in the attitude of the students of this college. The post-partition rehabilitation problem of the Bengalees from the erstwhile East Pakistan was not solved. As a result, protests mounted among the middle class intellectuals of Calcutta and spread among the student circle also. The leftist political forces had been much active behind this. During the days of the Food Movement, students also shared the cause of the peasant community. In 1965, a political movement had been organized by the students of Presidency College. This culminated in the devastating student turbulence of 1968-1971. During this period, Presidency College portico witnessed large scale violence and bloodshed, coupled with mass scale damages of property and laboratories. Irrespective of the merits or demerits of these movements, they clearly indicated the anti-establishment attitude of the students of Presidency College. In the protest movements and rallies against American interventions in Vietnam, students of this

College joined in a mass scale. But strangely enough, under the earlier British rule, be it the glaring genocide of Jalianwallabagh or the police firing at the Hijli jail resulting in the martyrdom of Santosh Mitra and Tarakeshwar Sengupta, any anti-British stir had failed to invoke the expected feeling or expression of protest among the students of Presidency College and they continued to remain rather passive.

Besides the rising political consciousness in the post-1947 period, the cultural consciousness also gained much prominence among the students of this institution. Students contributed with commendable sincerity in organising different types of cultural programmes, seminars by eminent scholars and numerous festivals. Furthermore, in spite of the change in the nature and concept of culture and values with time, students' efforts never lagged behind in furthering a mature and humanitarian cultural set-up in this college.

The trend for the last decade shows that about 96% of the students of Presidency College come from the wealthy class of the society. A survey will show that boys and girls of the college belong to either professional groups or top-ranking bureaucrat or business families. Low income group families are practically not represented here. Naturally, an air of superiority complex abounds in the values and outlooks of the present students. Another trend or practice is increasing day by day. More and more students of this college are going abroad for post-graduate and other higher studies. It has become a fashion of the day. Besides, the hegemony or predominance of a particular class definitely hinders competitive attitude and the process of self-evaluation is nipped in the bud. As a result, the students are running after made-easy methods of success and the "never-losing" spirit is lacking.

Presidency College is admittedly an

educational institution of excellence as a whole. It has attained an unassailable record in the Indian educational field. It has attracted a galaxy of scholars and has been turning out students who leave their mark in national and international fields. But is that enough? There is hardly any future leadership probability among the students. The fundamental aim of education is the innovation of higher values and ideas and their proper application in real life. Institutions like Presidency College must provide a pioneering effort for this. The "good will" cannot win without renunciation of the socio-political self-centrism. Is it too much to expect that Presidency College will assume a leading role in fulfilling this social obligation?

It is difficult to achieve success, but more difficult to perpetuate it. This is a burning problem for the teachers and students of Presidency College. It is difficult but not impossible. In order to eradicate the infrastructural inconvenience, governmental assistance is a must. At the same time, the college campus, libraries and laboratories must be expanded. Students, in larger number and with higher merits, cannot otherwise avail themselves of the full advantage of studying here. Under the UGC assistance, there is a scheme for a three-storied air-conditioned central library building in the college premises. Unfortunately, a lack of funds has affected development activities. The newly constructed building in front of the college auditorium (Derozio Hall) stands unfinished for the last two years.

Today's Presidency College needs self-evaluation and self-analysis. The students as well as teachers must take note of this. Otherwise, the past glory will be confined to the pages of history with no link with the present or the future. The question of autonomy has been heard for a few years. But autonomy will be meaningful for Presidency College only when it possesses an ultramodern infrastructure and a full-fledged capacity to mobilise sufficient resources.

Otherwise, autonomy will be incomplete and burdensome. Besides, the college must restore its lost ground in P.G. teaching along with the facilities for research. Recently, full-fledged P.G. teaching has been introduced in Physics and Zoology. Attempts are being made to introduce it in more disciplines.

Presidency College must assume a more active socio-cultural role which requires a total involvement. The present and future students

of this college must realise that modernism does not imply a blind imitation of the Western culture, values and outlook. Neither the students nor the teachers can abrogate their responsibility to the larger society and the future generations. We in this college must take the solemn oath of social responsibility and self-introspection in order to attain a greater national significance. That will be the fittest way of celebrating the 175th anniversary of this premier institution of learning.