

Presidency College Union Society

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I understand from an article by Shri Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay published in the *Autumn Annual*, Vol. XVIII, 1989-90, that the Presidency College Union was first founded on 8 September 1877, by Prof. J. V. S. Pope, Professor of English, while the Centenary Volume (1955) indicates that the College Union was established in 1905 by Dr. Prasanna Kumar Ray, an exponent in Philosophy and the first Indian Principal of the College. I am going neither into the controversy nor into the history of the Union. When I joined the prestigious Presidency College for my Intermediate Science (ISc) classes after passing the Matriculation Examination in 1938, I found that there was a Union, but strictly on a nominated basis. I had the good fortune to continue in the College for my BSc (Honours) and MSc (Geology) classes. In the year 1944, during my study in the College, the Late Apurba Kumar Chanda, a doyen of English teachers and the then Principal, brought about two important changes in the Presidency College. One was the introduction of co-education—girl students listening to the same lectures with the boys. The second was an elective College Union.

Before the change, the nominated Union functioned under the guidance of the Late Bhupati Mohan Sen, the then Principal as well as a renowned Mathematician, and the Late Suren Mazumdar, Professor of History. Due to this system, only boys from elite families could come into prominence even if they possessed no organisational capability. It was during the 1944-45 session that the students got for the first time a Union that was not only democratically elected but also largely independent. A new constitution was drawn up which could boast of its sophisticated single preferential voting system. The affairs of the Union were totally controlled by the elected council, subject to the supervision of a teacher in each of its sections. No teacher ever attended a council meeting; by the constitution, the Principal of the College was the *ex-officio* President of the Union—only once, the President was present for some time at a council meeting as a visitor. The Late Sabyasachi Mukherjee, who died in harness as the

Chief Justice of India, became the General Secretary. A great enthusiasm was noticed among the students after the election. Besides other regular activities, the Founders' Day of the College was celebrated on 20 January with great pomp and show under the able guidance of the Late Aprurba Kumar Chanda and the enthusiastic organisation by the Late Sabyasachi Mukherjee. A week-long programme commenced from that year. Besides the Annual Sports including the past students' event, a debate presided over by the Vice-President, friendly cricket and tennis matches between the past and present students, probably a drama enacted by the past students, and a cultural entertainment were held. Sumptuous dishes were served to the students who came to the College on that date. Full discipline was maintained in the dining hall which was an upstairs classroom in the Main Building, and the management was done totally by the students. The Late Gourinath Shastri, a distinguished scholar and teacher of Sanskrit who would be the Principal of the Sanskrit College in later years, was present at the dining hall when the Vice-President went there on his usual round. The latter was stopped at the entrance of the room by the volunteers present—they were right in doing this, because the Vice-President was not wearing his badge. The Late Gourinath Shastri immediately intervened and asked: "Whom are you stopping? Don't you know your Vice-President?"

The President sometimes called the Vice-President to his room to discuss certain matters. He always offered the latter a seat. When, on the first occasion, the Vice-President hesitated to take his seat, the Principal reminded him: "Don't forget that you are the elected Vice-President of the Union." On the other side, the General Secretary withdrew a deficit budget and changed it, when requested by the President. There was thus a mutual respect for each other.

The same tradition continued even when the Late Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, the father of Statistics in India, became the Principal. Incidentally, I still remember his lucid lecture on random sampling at the Physics Lecture Theatre.

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The student leaders of the Union were very keen to run the Union in a proper manner. To learn more about this, the Vice-President and the General Secretary even attended a session of the Bengal Legislative Assembly and watched the proceedings from the Speaker's gallery—Golam Rasul Jilani, son of the Late Syed Nausher Ali who was then the Speaker, was a student of the College at the time.

Sometimes I wonder whether the elective College Union acted as a catalyst in the formation of the Presidency College Alumni Association which was founded in 1951. The Alumni Association has since been taking the initiative and shouldering a large share of the responsibility in organizing the Founders' Day celebrations on 20 January every year. It is sad, however, that the Union plays little role now in those celebrations. ■