

Principal H. R. James

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MY teachers. All are gone the old familiar faces. But their memory lingers, and I remember them with greater and greater affection and love as years roll by. I regard our teachers as torch bearers who handed over their torches to us in the hope that we would carry them with dignity. Have we been able to do so? It is difficult for us to answer the question. Amongst my teachers in the Presidency College I cherish most the memory of Henry Rosbe James, a tragic figure who under extraordinary circumstances had to quit the college despite his love for and services to the student community. I passed the Matriculation Examination in 1914 from the zillah School, Faridpore (now in Bangladesh). A little before the results were out an attack of malareial influenza laid me low for a few days. So I was a little late in coming to Calcutta and seeking admission in the Presidency College. When I arrived admission had been practically closed for the year. My mark sheet, however, proved to be a passport to admission. Principal James took me in. I also got admitted in the Eden Hindu Hostel and accommodated in ward V of the hostel where I spent six years of my life as a boarder. In 1920, I was appointed Prefect of my ward. I specially mention my hostel life because I feel that in a sense hostel life was more educative than formal instructions in the college.

James used to take a personal interest in the welfare of the students of the College. As an evidence of his solicitude for the good of his pupils I would mention my own experience at an interview with him. It came off at the end of my intermediate course in 1916. James had decided that there would be no test for sending up boys for the University Examination. They were to be allowed or disallowed on the results of the Annual Examination and tutorials. I had done well in all subjects except Mathematics in which my marks were very poor. But in logic and Sanskrit I was bracketed first. James sent for me. I was not a little nervous when I was ushered into his presence. But James put me at my ease. He spoke to me somewhat as follows: "You have done well in other subjects, particularly in Logic and Sanskrit, but in Mathematics your marks are miserable. It appears you have neglected this subject. You must promise

that you will devote enough attention to Mathematics." I felt ashamed of myself and promised accordingly. At the interview he was very kind and sympathetic.

In 1914, Principal James was at the top of his popularity with the students community. A year earlier he had introduced an innovation in student-Principal relationship that made him the darling of the pupils of the college. The institution was the Student's Advisory Council. It consisted of elected representative of each of the College classes. The Principal of the College was the ex-officio President of the Council. In 1913-16 Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was the representative of his class for four successive years 1913, 1914, 1915 and 1916.

Principal James taught us Milton's 'Sonnets' for a year when we were in the First Year Class in place of Professor Nikhil Moitra after his sad and untimely death. James wanted us to get by heart a few of the Sonnets of Milton including the sonnet on blindness. He set apart 10 marks in the paper in English of poems from memory at the Annual Examination. To begin with I had some difficulty in following his pronunciation. But very soon I got used to it. I still remember his teaching technique which included attractive introduction to the background of each of Milton's Sonnets.

When World War I broke out in all its fury James got ready a huge map of the Western Front and placed it in the Library Hall so that the students of the College might get an idea of the respective positions of the Allied and German forces in the Western Front. Paper-made little British and German flags were stuck at the head of pins and placed in appropriate positions to indicate the progress and retreat of the rival armies.

Principal James used to come to the college before the classes began and shifted the flags. But soon it appeared that the Germans were making tremendous advances and swept everything before them. At this stage, James gave up his daily practice of placing the flags according to the progress of the battles.

I remember Principal James as a lover of his pupils in so far as he liked to identify himself with the manifold activities of the students of the College. When I was in the First Year class of the College I

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used to go very often to the Gymnasium of the College which was accommodated in the tin-shed just behind the College building. On a winter afternoon, Principal James most unexpectedly appeared in the gymnasium when some of us were taking our daily exercises under the Gymnastic Master Kalicharan Santra. James exchanged a few words with us, and then put off his coat and showed us some beautiful figures on the parallel bar—swinging, peacock, frog march etc. He was about 55 years of age then and was, therefore out of practice for a long time. But the grace and agility he displayed was that of a youngman of twenty. After James left the gymnastic master told us that from time to time. Principal James used to give surprise visits so that students interested might be enthused.

In 1914, the Presidency College won the Elliot Shield in Intercollegiate Football tournament. The winning team included Jnan Roy (Kanu) and Rajen Sen of Mohan Bagan fame. Both these players played for Mohun Bagan when it won the I.F.A. shield (1911). When the news of the victory of the Presidency College reached the hostel there was wild enthusiasm and the students made a bonfire of old broken furniture of the hostel waiting for repairs. The Superintendent Prof. Hriday Nath Bannerjee of the Physics department of the College intervened. But the students did not pay any heed to his warning. A report was duly sent to the Principal. The Superintendent proposed a fine on students responsible for the bonfire. When the report reached Principal James he laughed and wrote back to ask the Superintendent to ignore it. The incident was dismissed as an expression of “youthful exuberance” by James. He was too good a friend of the students to take serious notice of such incidents.

My memory of an evening in the Hindu Hostel is still vivid in my mind. It was dinner time. Principal James unexpectedly appeared in dinner dress in Ward V of the hostel where I used to stay. The word of his arrival went round and we boarders of Ward V quickly assembled at the daily club benches known as the ‘Common Bench’ round our Principal. In course of conversation he told us about his own College life. At the time Rabindra Nath’s popularity was almost universal. His ‘Gitanjali’ published by the Macmillans had penetrated even into the exclusive circles of Englishmen and women in India. James who was essentially a scholar perhaps knew Tagore’s English works very well. He recited a poem from Gitanjali: “He comes and comes and ever comes” etc. This is the English version of “তারা গুনিসনি কি, গুনিসনি কি তার পায়ের ধ্বনি, সে যে আসে, আসে আসে” etc.

Principal James after having recited the poem in his characteristically attractive style asked any one of us to recite the original poem in Bengali. None of us could do so and we were feeling slightly ashamed of ourselves and we kept silent. James appeared to be genuinely surprised. He, however, did not comment on our failure. He turned his conversation to other matters and after a time he left. Some of us went up to the gate of the hostel to see him off. As the result of our experience that evening we felt that Principal James had drawn us closer to him.

The year 1916 was a fateful year for James. It was then that the Oaten incident took place. Professor F. F. Oaten, Professor of History was a brilliant teacher and acquired great popularity with the students of history. He, however, in course of one of his lectures asserted that a comparison between Roman Empire and the British empire in India was instructive. The Roman empire had a civilising mission in its different parts inhabited by barbarous people. Similarly, the British Empire in India carried the burden of establishing modern civilisation in India. This remark set the college on fire. It is noteworthy that round about 1916 the revolutionary movement in Bengal had acquired a great momentum and a significant section of the student community of the college were involved in the movement. The students began to talk about an all-out strike until Oaten openly apologised for his arrogant remark. Meetings were held and protest resolutions were passed. Among those who took a prominent part were Bepin De, later Principal of Habiganj College, Sylhet, Ananga Mohan Das, later a front rank Hindu Mahasabha leader and Subhas Chandra Bose (Netaji). It was rumoured that Principal H. R. James had described Oaten’s remark as highly “Indiscrete”. In this tense atmosphere there occurred another incident which added fuel to the fire. Professor Rabindra Narayan Ghose of the English Department was to have taken a Third Year class in Room No. 1. He was late in coming to his class. Students, naturally took advantage of their Professor’s absence and assembled in the corridor. It appeared to be front of Room No. 2 where Oaten was taking a fourth year class in History Honours. Oaten’s class was disturbed and he came out and asked the boys to disperse. Some left but some others continued their hot discussion. Oaten was very much annoyed. He came out of his Class for the second time. He reportedly caught one of the boys by his shirt collar and dragged him to the Principal who fined the boy Rs. 15/-. This proved to be the signal for an indefinite strike. Principal James thereupon issued a notice

ordering the striking students to join their classes by a certain date. On their failure to do so a fine of Rs. 5/- would have to be paid by each boy. The vast majority of the students failed to abide by the Principal's order and the strike continued. Some students submitted false certificates to escape the fine. Amongst the students who took a leading part in picketing at the College gate was Subhas Chandra Bose. At this stage, the senior Indian teachers of the College intervened and the strike was withdrawn. We had to pay the fine imposed.

This was the first round of the clash between the students and the authorities of the College. Shortly after this there was a repetition of disturbance in the corridor attached to Oaten's History Seminar Class. The report was that Oaten took hold of a boy and dragged him to the Principal's room who fined him Rs. 15/-. This incident proved to be the last straw. In a hurriedly called 'War Council' student leaders decided to give a fitting reply to Oaten's physical 'assault' of students by beating him (Oaten) up. Amongst the leaders were Bepin De, Ananga Mohan Dam and Subhas Chandra Bose. While Oaten who was then Professor-in-Charge of Sports was coming down the grand staircase to put up a notice on the Sports Notice Board he was struck from behind. Oaten fell and was soundly beaten up.

The Senior teachers of the College intervened for the second time. They held a meeting in the hostel because the Hostel was regarded as the centre of students pourparlars leading to the 'Oaten incident'. Amongst the teachers who addressed us was Dr. Prafulla Chandra Roy. Distinguished outsiders like Sir Gooroodass Banerjee, first Indian Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University also offered their services. They asked the 'culprits' to confess and assured the students that such culprits would be pardoned. None came forward and there was no solution. All these occurred on the day of the incident. Government of Bengal was perturbed and they practically took over the matter. James was ordered to close the College for an indefinite period. A committee was appointed to enquire into the matter. The principal of the College was not consulted as regards the composition of the Enquiry Committee. The Chairman of the Committee was Sir Ashutosh Mookherjee and one of the members was W. W. Hornell both of whom were described by Principal James as his 'enemies'. He refused to serve on the Committee. After his refusal matters moved very quickly. P. C. Lyon, J. C. S., Education Member of Governor's Executive Council asked Principal James

to see him at the Secretariat. At the fateful meeting of P. C. Lyon and James at the Secretariat temper on both sides was frayed. It was supposed at the time that P.C. Lyon accused James of inefficiency. He further hinted that for a long time James had been acting in a manner which amounted to shielding the revolutionary students contrary to British interest. Further, his activities were contrary to the promotion of British interests in India. At this, James was infuriated and subjected P. C. Lyon according to Government Communique, to "physical insults". Rumour went round at the time that James had given P. C. Lyon a mighty slap. The upshot of it was that James was demoted to be the Inspector of Schools, Presidency Division. James immediately resigned and applied for long leave preparatory to retirement and left India disgraced unhonoured and unsung. This meant the exit from the educational scene of Bengal a great scholar who happened to be a true friend of Bengalee students.

Another aspect of James career as Principal is noteworthy. Our time in the Hindu Hostel and Presidency College (1914-1920) witnessed the hightide of revolutionary upsurge in Bengal. The Police regarded the Hindu Hostel as one of the most active centres of 'terrorist' organisations in the province. They very often searched the Hostel to arrest revolutionaries in hiding or arms and incriminating documents. The Police would have liked to search the hostel without any notice to the Principal. But principal James never allowed it. He insisted on a secret notice to the Principal. The Police complaint was that the secret information to the Principal leaked out and when the Police appeared in the hostel to search the birds would have already flown. I remember an occasion. It was a fullmoon night. Clarke, Commissioner of Police, was himself present expecting a big haul. But the Police were disappointed. They got nothing. Towards the end of the search, Principal James came to the hostel and addressing Clarke somewhat derisively said "Clarke why don't you play a football game with my boys now?" Clarke kept glum and quickly left the hostel.

James after his retirement to England did not spend his days in idleness. His work in two Volumes 'Our Hellenic Heritage' bears testimony not only to his scholarship but also to his prodigious labour. To my mind principal H. R. James was a tragic figure, ill-treated by an unimaginative and heartless Government and much misunderstood by the student community, a victim of circumstances over which he had no control.