



Prof. Subodh Chandra Sengupta

TAPATI GUPTA

INTERVIEW

Q : When did you join Presidency College as a student ?

Ans: I came from the matriculation exam. I won a scholarship. That was in 1920; I was a Presidency student right up to 1926.

Q : There must have been many British professors at that time ?

Ans : Quite a few. But there came about a change in the structure of the Education Department. It came under the jurisdiction of a ministry supervised by an elected minister. After this, many of the British professors began to take early retirement and move homeward. The last recruitment to the Indian Education Service was in 1919.

Q : I believe the Principal used to be an Englishman ?

Ans : Yes, always. I also remember that the Professor and Head of the Physics department was English, one E. P. Harrison. But he too retired soon and Professor P. C. Mahalanobis stepped into his shoes.

Q : There must have been Englishmen in the —

Ans : English Department ? Right. There were Professors Stirling and Holme. The former, quite a happy-go-lucky type, had himself photographed with the students before he left, and I heard that he could identify each student from the group photograph. From England, he used to send his contribution to the Students' Aid Fund. He even bequeathed some of his property to the college. He was a bachelor.

Q : He must have been an interesting person!

Ans : A jolly good chap. He took everything lightly. He was also the Bursar.

Q : Was he a good teacher ?

Ans : Well, he took only the I.A. classes because he was a

paper-setter for B.A. Such were the norms. He used to say that pronunciation indicated one's place of origin.

Q : And Mr. Holme ?

Ans : A very good teacher with an academic approach. He was editor of the Arden edition of *As You Like It*. He had rigid notions about prose style. "Use no extra adjective, and if you use "very" before an adjective, I'd fine you Re. 1/- for every such use", he used to say. Difficult advice for us ! Wasn't ornamentation the soul of style? Mr. Holme was always careful to define the terms he used : Romanticism, Renaissance — the latter to him was the "apotheosis of man" — I have found no better definition than this. He taught us the Special Paper in B. A. and the Romantic period in M. A. Romantic poetry he defined by quoting Keats' famous lines: "Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn"

Q : What was the nature of the student teacher relationship? Were the Englishmen intimate with students as, for instance, Derozio had been ?

Ans : No — on the contrary, perhaps it was due to the presence of these Englishmen that there was a barrier between the students and teachers, a chit had to be sent in order to enter the professors' common room.

Q : It is so different today — the place now looks like a common room for students.

Ans : I, however, had a certain privilege in the fourth year class. I was then Editor of the college magazine and Professor Srikumar Banerjee was Editor-in-chief. Students watched my sorties to and from the staff-room with awe.

Q : There must have been tutorial classes in which...

Ans : There was more scope for student and teacher to

come intellectually closer to each other. You still have such sessions in college today especially in our English department. This was and still is possible because of the small student-teacher ratio.

Q : Do you remember any interesting tutorial episode ?

Ans : Ten to eleven a.m. was the allotted hour for four students who did tutorials with Mr. Holme. He would devote the first half hour to two of them while the other two would come at eleven. One of them I heard had written the phrase "destroyed the life of many people," whereupon he got a sharp nudge of the pencil from Holme who growled, "And why not the simple Teutonic word "killed" ?

Q : Though during the last year I've noticed an element of seriousness on the part of many students and teachers regarding the pass subjects, they were quite neglected in my time

Ans : So too when I was a student, but then it was primarily students who were the shirkers. The exception was Professor P. C. Ghosh's English classes. Then there used to be a scramble for the front benches.

Q : What pass subjects did you read, sir?

Ans : Economics and History. But I usually studied these subjects just before the exams.

Q : And what was your impression of these classes ?

Ans : Well, of the three teachers who taught us Economics, two would just dictate notes which the students did not even bother to take down. Sir Jahangir Coyajee was a distinguished teacher of Economics. He was knighted while still in service whereas J. C. Bose and P. C. Roy were knighted after retirement. Coyajee streamlined the teaching of Economics in Presidency.

Q : Did you attend his classes ?

Ans : Yes, though it was actually like non-attendance. He taught us in the fourth year class. The classes were comprised of both honours and pass students (that is, combined classes). The Honours fellows naturally sat in front. What ensued was conversation between Coyajee and his Honours students of which we back-benchers followed not a word. In fact without a grasp on the subject it was impossible for anyone to follow.

Coyajee a man of multiple scholarship was a good scholar of Persian, had record marks in History at Bombay University, a first class Tripose degree of Cambridge.

Q : Ah yes! Gone are the days of non-specialisation

and liberal scholarship. I believe Coyajee also became Principal?

Ans : He was so, for a time. In those days special consideration was shown to sons of the founders of the Hindu College at the time of admission. One gentleman, claiming the privilege for his son, said he had donated the tower clock. "But", said the Principal, "despite his legitimate rights, your son has passed in the second division. Make him appear again and get a first division".

Coyajee introduced a few administrative reforms : admission on the basis of marks, waiver of the custom of granting special concessions to Muslim candidates, and doing away with the Madrassah in the college. Even wards of V.I.P.s had to produce a respectable marksheet.

Q : How did it feel to be a teacher at Presidency ?

Ans : The story behind my appointment is interesting. It shows how different those days were. Mine was the last appointment to be recommended by the governing body; after that the Public Service Commission took over such things. I came to know later that there was a heated debate between the Principal and the D.P.I., both Englishmen ; it was thought I should be given a junior post in the J.E.S. They wanted the B.E.S. post to be filled by promotion and not by fresh recruitment. The former was class III (Rs. 150 - 450) while the latter was class II (Rs. 250 - 800). Dr. Srikumar Banerjee was firmly in my favour; he recommended the higher post, stressing my academic qualifications — the Premchand Raychand scholarship and research work. He pointed out the anomaly in a set-up that urged research yet was unsympathetic towards scholars. Mr. Barrow was adamant. "But I don't know this young man," he argued. "Is that at all necessary?" remarked another young man.

There is a similar history behind the appointment of Dr. Srikumar Banerjee himself, the only Ishan scholar in English. His first appointment was at Ripon (Surendranath) College. Professor P. C. Ghosh advised Banerjee to meet Principal H. R James about a post at Presidency College, though it was a bit late. James who knew of Dr. Banerjee's scholarship was helpless "I've already made my recommendations," he Said, "But please remember my request," pleaded Dr. Banerjee.

"There are people who desire but do not deserve; you deserve but do not seem to desire," said James.

Principal James had just sent a note for a post to be transferred to the Darjeeling Government College. He despatched a messenger to intercept the note which was

annulled. Dr. Banerjee was appointed at Presidency. Today there is more secrecy about the mode of appointment probably because of party politics.

(After a slight pause, Dr. Sengupta mused, sounding like a slow chant) : If there was anyone irreplaceable it was P. C. Ghosh. And H. M. Percival. And Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose.

Q: I believe after Professor Ghosh's retirement, two English professors were summoned from 'home' to replace him ?

Ans : Yes, and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar remarked, "The man who is being replaced by two Englishmen is himself an Indian". Principal James later wrote to Professor Ghosh, "I congratulate you; or should I congratulate myself for bringing you ?"

Q : Was there any important change in the status of the college while you were there ?

Ans : Co-education was introduced in 1944. It became a purely Honours institution and rich people's children got no privileges. Merit was the only criterion for admission.

Q : The administrative powers of the Principal are much reduced today. Even the A.C.R.s are written by the departmental heads and only countersigned by the Principal. Is this a welcome change ?

Ans : The 'Heads' do enjoy certain powers not found in other colleges. Since this departmental autonomy has not harmed the academic standards of the college, I cannot say it is bad.

Q : The long-standing demand for making Presidency an autonomous institution- is this demand justified ?

Ans : Oh yes, certainly. Autonomy should be granted immediately. Also the privilege to hold M. A. classes in all subjects, as it used to be.

Q : Should the present custom of modeling admission tests in all subjects be continued ?

Ans : Certainly, though it wasn't there in the early days. When I joined as a student, admission to the intermediate class used to be on the basis of marks. The decision regarding admission test would depend on the discretion of the head of the department concerned even as it did previously. When I was the Head of the English Department, those who had high marks were admitted directly, while others had to write an admission test. Professor T. N. Sen introduced admission test for all candidates. Each department had its own policy.

Q : Were the students and teachers in the past interested in politics ?

Ans : Not very much. The Teachers Association was formed around 1954-55. But general politics were kept out of the staff room. In pre-independence days, I have no knowledge of any teacher getting involved in political movements.

Q : Was the college affected during the Quit India Movement in 1942?

Ans : No. During the Civil Disobedience Movement only one gate used to remain open. Principal Barrow disliked police intervention in college. In 1947 I was the partition committee secretary. The Government rewarded me for writing the report.

Q : Do you approve of the routine transfer of teachers ? Has it done the college any good ?

Ans : Certainly not. It wasn't there in my time.

Q : What future do you predict for Presidency College ?

Ans : I cannot foresee the future. I don't want to try. Let us hope for the best.

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