

# Reminiscences

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Experiences of old boys, especially of those who had spent six long years in the College, are so many and so variegated that rendering all of them in black and white is virtually impossible. Even to recollect them in retrospect is a baffling task, for all the experiences seem to make a simultaneous bid for expression, as did all the objects of desire from Pandora's Box. Again, emotion plays no small part in such recording of experiences. It therefore appears prudent to try to speak at random about *some* of them, lest *multum in parvo* should spoil the game.

Students of Hindu and Hare Schools have the luxury of territorial advantage regarding Presidency College. The playground in front of the Hare School was shared on alternate days by us, students of the Hindu School and the playground was the only geographical barrier between Presidency College on the one hand and the two Schools on the other. In fact, some of us from Hindu School would also use the field behind the observatory of the College as our football ground, because in our time this ground was not narrowed by any building as in the present days. It is therefore no wonder that many of us knew by face most of the teachers of the College, particularly those whose fame had reached far. Some of the teachers of the College were old students of our School, that is, Hindu School. For example the Shastri brothers, Ashoknath and Gaurinath, were not only alumni of the School, but they were the revered priests of the School at the yearly worship of the goddess of learning. Another professor of the College, Durgagati Chatteraj, was a frequent visitor to the School, for he was an intimate friend of one of our teachers, namely Karunamoy Banerji. In spite of such familiarity with the College and some of its teachers, none of us

can deny the trepidation of heart that we felt when we climbed the stairs of the imposing building in order to obtain admission forms from the Bursar Prof. G. D. Bhar whose stern exterior evoked no less fear. That was in July, 1942.

Two daughters of Principal P. K. Roy were the first girl students of the College, but that single event did not open the gates of the College to the girls. It was from 1946 that girl students were regularly enrolled. Their admission to the College raised a ripple of protest from a few of us and I wrote a couple of letters to the then English dailies of Calcutta criticizing the event. I also saw Principal P. Mahalanobis to convey our protest. Principal Mahalanobis, without trying to understand the point I made, sarcastically commented that there were such conservative people in the city who would like to keep their womenfolk secluded inside the four walls of their *jenana mahal* and asked if I belonged to them. I replied that his comment was beside the issue, because the objection was only against the narrowing of the scope of admission-seeking boys, who were many more in number than the girls, in obtaining the best education of the country. Of the other two government colleges for boys in the city, one was meant mainly for a particular community and the other for specializing in Indian classical languages. As against this, there were two government colleges meant exclusively for girls in which seats were going abegging, so to say. There was no reason, I argued, to crowd Presidency College with the influx of girls, some of whom were not even first divisioners. Principal Mahalanobis's opinion was that teaching of honours in the Presidency College was the best in the country and therefore the girls should not be deprived of it. There was no

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question about the excellence of *honours* teaching in Presidency College, but my objection was mainly against the sagacity of admitting the girls to the intermediate classes and second divisioners to honours classes. He conceded and said that in future girls would be taken into the honours classes only. Another objection was against the conversion of the economics seminar into the girls' common room to which he had no satisfactory reply. He said that he would keep in mind the question of finding out a room for economics seminar.

Shortly after our admission into the College, the entire country came into the grip of the Quit India movement of Mahatma Gandhi. Because of the turmoil that followed, the College was closed for quite a long time. When it reopened, our very first English class was taken by Professor Taraknath Sen who was mostly known as TNS. TNS read, or rather recreated, Geikie's essay on Science in Education in the IA class. From that day till the end of the sixth year, I had the unique privilege of attending his lectures or seeking his guidance in academic and extra-curricular activities. Since my association with him as a pupil has been for a period longer than that with any other teacher of the College, I shall confine my reminiscences only to what I had seen or known of him.

It is not for me to fathom the depth of TNS's erudition; if I tried to do so, it would be as ridiculous as trying to bail out the water of an ocean with a spoon. It was not English literature or language alone in which he excelled; his knowledge of Greek Gothic and Latin was equally marvellous. I have heard the following anecdote about his depth in and mastery of English, and even if the story is exaggerated, it no doubt aims at measuring the magnitude of his erudition. D. S. C. Sengupta, a Shakespearean scholar of no small fame, had sent his manuscript on Shakespearean comedy to Sir Allardyce Nicoll for comments, so that he could suggest improvement. Before doing so he had shown the same copy to his junior colleague TNS

whose superiority in writing English was freely admitted by him. TNS recorded his observations on the margin of the copy. Sir Allardyce returned the MS saying that though he did not know as to who had recorded the observations on its margin, he had nothing further to add. Does that not speak volumes of TNS's mastery of the subject? He read Shakespeare to us in honours classes and thought that lectures of an hour a day were insufficient to teach Shakespeare. Like H. M. Percival, who was a legend in teaching English, he would take the last class of the day at two or three o'clock or beyond. He read *Merchant of Venice* to us in the final honours year in 1946. He would often continue his lecture without break till nine o'clock in the evening. It was a rare experience for us to listen to him, not only for understanding Shakespeare but also for knowing as to which celebrated actor made what gesture on the stage to convey the full import of Shakespearean dialogue. At times he provided lucid intervals, so to say, to describe how, without comprehending that the half lines at the end of a dialogue in blank verse were to be filled up by action, Dover Wilson had come out with a theory of 'cut'! He continued reading *Merchant of Venice* till a few days before the honours examination in April when in the stillness of the late evening the tingling of bells from a nearby temple could be heard but the professor would continue: "It's such a night as this..."

He was an ardent believer in the Greek principle of "nothing in excess" and would not repeat even a word during his long sittings so much so that if one was inattentive in the least, one would often miss the rest of the discourse. Not only that, he would advocate complete identity of the reader with poetry or any literary creation, because the process was he held, identical with the ascetic practice of a yogi in his realization of Brahma in other words, it was *Brahmaswadahasahodara* of Vishwanath's *Sahityadarpan*.

In his article in the Silver Jubilee issue of

the College Magazine, Prof. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh wrote : "... the bond that should keep together teacher and taught is struck in a letter he (H.M. Percival) wrote in 1929 to Professor Taraknath Sen, who was then editor of the Presidency College Magazine : "...from the warmth with which you write of me and of my old, affectionate pupil, \*\*\*\*, now your teacher, I like to think that your chosen subject, like his and mine, is English". Can anything else be more expressive of the quality of TNS's English, whose lectures on Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, edited by Percival, was a fitting obituary, so to say ?

TNS was strict in awarding marks to his pupils. Unlike in other subjects, high marks obtained by a student in the intermediate examination was no passport to his taking up honours in English; he must pass an honours test before obtaining admission to this discipline. The English honours test was usually taken by TNS. In 1944, some forty aspirants, all first divisioners with high marks in English, sat for the test. About twenty-five of them secured, or "managed" to secure in Dr. Srikumar Banerji's language, zero. Those who passed were given tick marks by TNS, the topmost amongst them obtaining only twentyfive out of one hundred ! Among the zero-scorers was an alumnus of distinction from Santiniketan. He was not late to realize that discretion was the better part of valour,

and changed over to Bengali honours; later, he became a professor in Dacca University. Those who scored 15 or less did not take up honours in English.

TNS was endowed with a strong sense of patriotism. When the publication of the College Magazine was resumed in 1948 after its suspension for about six years during the days of paper scarcity, he suggested that the Bengali section in the Magazine should get the pride of place and hence rearrangement of the articles was made in the Magazine. A series on the freedom fighters from amongst the College alumni was also started at his suggestion. Though Prof. Somnath Maitra was then the chairman of the editorial board of the Magazine, he would often ask me to obtain TNS's advice on editorial matters as well as on the selection of articles.

Writings of TNS are few and most of these were the products of his student days. I have mentioned above that I had the opportunity of meeting him frequently for academic and non-academic purposes but I did not dare to take the liberty of asking any personal question. It was after passing out of the College that I could muster sufficient strength to ask him as to why he did not render his discourses and thoughts into black and white. With supreme indifference, he smilingly replied, "What is the use"? That aptly sums up his realization of mundane nothingness.