

Reminiscences of College Life

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I was a student of the History Honours class (1948-50) of Presidency College and joined the Postgraduate class (1950-52) of Calcutta University 'through the College'. This meant certain facilities like special classes which might be held there, and use of the College library; the College Magazine was always edited by a PG student.

If I am right, there were fifteen girls among the third year Hons. students in the Arts Faculty and fewer in the Science Faculty in my time. The co-education policy was still unstable, no girl having been admitted to the Intermediate course (1946-48). But girls had been studying in the College for some time. Of course, this continued and the number increased after us. Boys far outnumbered girls, but merit had become the sole criterion of admission. This meant a certain weakening of social elitism. While the upper classes (and castes) were still predominant, the student body was less exclusive than before. Immediately after independence, there was simplicity in the way of life.

A girl would come to College in a plain white or coloured cotton sari (no other mode of dress being in use for Bengali college girls then). Silk, jewellery or cosmetics were not used in College, though gold bangles or earrings were everyday wear for middle class girls and therefore hardly noticed. The hair was never unbound, but braided or pinned up (short hair being practically unknown). All this seemed to be part of an unwritten code of conduct.

Boys, too, dressed simply, colourful clothes or long hair being considered effeminate. Both boys and girls came by public transport as a rule. I think it was considered

snobbish to use the chauffeur-driven family cars many undoubtedly possessed. Money was not thrown about; expensive restaurant meals or entertainments were unusual.

My own batch of students broke a few taboos which seem laughable today but were very real then. From the first, the girls took the initiative to sit in the classroom without the presence of the teacher, instead of hanging about outside awaiting his arrival and leaving the room with him after class. This probably encouraged some of the boys who got up a picnic not long afterwards. A group of third year boys and girls went to the Botanical Gardens without any chaperon in the way of teachers or guardians; cooked food was brought and a group photograph taken. We got acquainted. The annual steamer party also helped the thawing process.

At first students of opposite sexes addressed each other formally (apni) but we soon slipped into the informal mode (tumi) though the least formal (tui) was never used between boys and girls however friendly. The formal 'apni' persisted among those who were not so well acquainted and among some of the boys as well, and it was obligatory in addressing senior students. But in time we dispensed with the 'apni' routine as when a boy introduced others, usually Science students, not known to us. We came to know some of the junior boys quite well.

The class as a whole experienced a sense of easy comradeship. Boys and girls held their 'adda' together on the College lawn, watched College cricket matches and went to the Coffee House together. Rumours to the effect that some of the senior men students did not like this freedom only amused us. If some of

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the teachers also disapproved, they never interfered.

These peculiarities are all explained by the fact that co-education was still a novelty in Calcutta, having existed so far only in the University, the Scottish Church College and areas of specialised instruction like medicine. Our 'free mixing' was a small turning point in College life, opening the way for the junior batches.

Outside College hours our "friends' circle", as we called it, met occasionally at each other's houses (where that was allowed) or certain favourite spots in South Calcutta. Sometimes the meetings were in twosomes – not quite 'dating', but near enough; the idea being to know each other better, exchange confidences. A girl might meet different boys in this way. Of course, there were some love affairs and some heartbreaks. An affair which prospered always had marriage as the goal. Considering the small number of girls, quite a few marriages were made in Presidency College. The ones I can recall off-hand are :

In my class :

Rathin Sengupta (History) m. Jayati Dasgupta (History), Aryakumar Mitra (History) m. Bharati Dasgupta (History), Supriya Roy (Geology) m. Chitra Saha (English).

Among junior students :

Sachindranath Ganguly (Philosophy) m. Sreela Mahalanobis (Philosophy), Supreo Bonnerjee (Economics) m. Rikta Majumder (Bengali), Ramanimohan Roy (Philosophy) m. Kamala (Philosophy), Kalyan Dattagupta (Mathematics) m. Chitra Sarkar (English), Sukhamoy Chakravarty (Economics) m. Lalita Bhaduri (Chemistry & Economics).

Apart from the lawn and Coffee House (occasionally the YMCA restaurant), community life centred on various events connected with Founders' Day, the annual

social, sports and steamer party, College Union and Debating Society, though the girls in my class did not participate actively in most of these. Seminar meetings were fairly regularly held. Common Rooms for boys and girls were separate, on different floors; only the boys' room had arrangements for some indoor games. Once the girls attended the Saraswati Puja get-together in Hindu Hostel for a short time. The teachers of our Department gave a small party in our classroom for the outgoing students.

Some students in the batch immediately after us organized a study circle (Pragati Parishad) and a wall-newspaper. They gave us a farewell, the girls making up pretty hand-painted cards. The next batch organized a variety programme (not, I think, the official College social) where, as far as I know, boys and girls went on a public stage together, breaking another taboo, if not precisely a rule. I heard Rikta acted in a playlet and Manjusri Chaki danced. In the batch of students after them, Sukhamoy and Lalita ran a wall-newspaper by themselves. All this helped develop personal and group relationships.

We girls felt privileged to have entered Presidency College and had a great love and loyalty for it. About six of us, who were special chums, sat on the lawn in nostalgic mood for a long time one afternoon when the last special class had been taken before we broke up for the examinations. About the same time some classmates who boarded at the Hindu Hostel quite suddenly got in touch with some of the boys and girls at their homes and asked them over to the Hostel that evening. We went and a last 'adda' took place in one of the rooms. One boy began to speak rather seriously of what the College years had meant to him, including the experience of our friendship together. We all spoke a little after that in the same vein, feeling quite solemn and moved about the past and the unknown future when we would go our different ways.