

Reminiscences

Ajit Kumar Gupta*

We joined Presidency College in the First Year in 1943. Our presence in the class was perceptible from the popular hits we sang in chorus from the back benches. We felt that the background music would improve the lectures and benefit our friends in the front benches.

The results of the first year barely allowed us to cross the thresholds of the second year. Undaunted, we arranged the reception of a new Professor of chemistry, Dr. P. C. Rakshit with catcalls as we didn't have the money to buy rotten eggs. Absentmindedly I heard a part of his lecture and was mesmerized. It changed my life. To stay with him I chose chemistry and later he introduced me to Sir Jnan Ghosh. This opened out horizons beyond my dreams.

The students were generally a serious lot but only as far as their Honours subjects were concerned. In the previous year a First Class First went into oblivion, having failed in a Pass subject. So the Honours students of other disciplines, who held their chemistry books upside down, beseeched us to answer their chemistry pass papers. Inspired by Vivekananda's 'Service above Self' that is also the motto of the Rotary Idecorate, we thought nothing of this sacrifice. Don't ask me how the questions and blank papers were brought to the Hindu Hostel, which were turned into model answer scripts, deserving letter marks. All went well; but my best friend Montu left his inimitably beautiful handwriting behind, that got him and the examinee in a real jam. Montu, a devout Christian, confessed and later shifted to St. Xaviers. In my utter innocence, I never dreamt of asking what happened to the other chap.

My friend Brojen Bhattacharya, who never stood second in his life, felt like some of us that the British were looting India. As a quid pro

quo, we carried back home simple things like beakers and Bunsen burners. They were our prized unused collection in our teens and a cause of shame and consternation thereafter. Surviving the greatest man-made famine of the century, we partook our meals after sparing whatever we could for our dying brethren on the streets. We, the young Robin Hoods, bestowed on them the coins we could save by travelling in second class tram cars and not paying for the ride in British CTC, unless caught.

Luxury was a taboo – a filthy word. I used hand me down jackets from my uncles, a shewani of my grandfather whom I had never seen, the torn dhotis of my father, which I sewed myself. My friend Rathi, son of S. N. Roy, I.C.S., and Mrs. Renuka Roy, came wearing torn punjabis and slept on mattresses, often without bedsheets, whilst Renuka mashima hobnobbed with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

We started a Vagabond's Club where Mukul (Das) played the guiter and we sang and read romantic or nationalistic songs and revolutionary poems, but could hardly scrape enough funds to enter the Coffee House.

A few of the boys belonged to the Students Federation, who were supporting the War efforts of the British Raj. The rest turned out to be revolutionaries, supporting the Azad Hind movement which culminated in the mammoth meeting at the Wellington Square, from where we revolutionaries marched to storm the Writers' Building. Mounted police stopped us on Dhurumtolla. I still wonder how I was chosen as a spokesman of the restive youth, along with two other students from other colleges I never met before. The triumvirate went to Woodburn Park to persuade Sarat Bose to address us. He

* Alumnus 1943-47 (Chemistry)

had just been freed from jail which we lovingly addressed as father-in-law's home, and was in no mood to rush back there. Like all other leaders of the day, he called us misguided youths, scolded us and ordered us to march back home.

We were not amused and must have made fiery speeches on return that inspired the mounted police to gallop and trample us causing a stampede helped by a liberal use of tear gas. A sobbing prodigal son went back home with burning eyes, but the fanatic crowd that he left behind, came back armed, some carrying revolvers. Young innocent blood was spilled profusely on Dhurumtolla, immortalised by young poet Sukanta in his "Thikana".

The revolution sparked at Dhurumtollah now engulfed not only Bengal but also the rest of the country as leaping flames that really made the British to Quit their Raj within a year. All our leaders who had not the least of sympathy for our movements, jumped on the bandwagon to cash in on the popular uprising that we unknowingly sparked. Gandhiji came to see his dream of quit India come true and

realised that but for the nightmare in Dhurumtollah, his dream would not have come true. We the boys of Presidency touched his feet at the Khardah Ashram and nabbed shoulders with Jawaharlal when he came to greet us, as the house guest of our Prof. P. C. Mahalanobis.

We deeply loved and respected our Professors, who would take classes at their homes when the college was curfew-bound. We all cried when we heard that Prof. Qudrat-e-Khuda was slaughtered and our joy knew no bounds when he came back alive, shaken enough to opt for Pakistan, where I met him as the greatest living scientist, at least of Bangladesh, with his heart and soul still glued to Calcutta and its premier college.

The milieu that we grew up in between the great famine and the independence is without parallel in the annals of our history. Like a lotus growing up from slime, through carnage blossomed a free India and through rancour sprang up great minds around us, who shaped the destiny of our land.