

Reminiscing my student days:

From Presidency to Penn State

SOUVIK DUTTA

I am one of those who loves his own hometown. I am from the city of joy, Kolkata. I was born and brought up in this beautiful city, lived here till the age of 21 when I had to leave for further studies. I did my undergraduate in Economics from Presidency College and then moved on to do my Masters in Economics from Delhi School of Economics (DSE). After completing my masters, I worked for an independent think tank in Delhi for a year before moving to the US to pursue my doctoral studies at Penn State University. Currently I am an assistant professor in Economics at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore.

My journey from Presidency to Penn State has taught me multiple lessons of life. I believe I have not only gained knowledge in Economics but also far greater knowledge about various aspects of life. As Swamiji says, "...Life is a series of fights and disillusionments.... The secret of life is not enjoyment, but

education through experience...".

In the year 2003, I was admitted to the Economics department at Presidency College. I still remember the first few days when I felt really nervous sitting among the best students of Kolkata, walking along those heritage corridors, seeing some of the eminent and globally acclaimed economists delivering seminars and talks. For the first time in my life, I discovered students with a clear aim in life, motivated to work and knowing exactly what they wanted out of those three years of undergraduate studies. They were focused and meritorious. I was not from one of those popular and well-known schools of Kolkata, neither did my family have a very strong academic background. As a result a sense of inferiority overwhelmed me in the beginning, affecting my performance in the college internal exams. I felt inadequate although nothing in the attitude of my peers or teachers should have generated this sense of inadequacy.

The contribution of the faculty and my fellow classmates in shaping my thought processes was immense. My teachers not only taught me the subject but, through the interactions I had with them outside the classroom, helped me to gain confidence. I started going to them for advice, even landing up with the stupidest questions possible, which they answered with a smile. My friends taught me how to be more patient and diligent. At the end of college I was a more mature and confident person. With the help of my teachers and friends I now knew what my career goals were.

After leaving Presidency College, I got admission at DSE. Now I had a different set of challenges to face. This was my first stay outside Kolkata and away from my family. Being the only son of my parents I had always led a very sheltered life and never had to deal with the external world till the age of 21. Everything around me now suddenly seemed unfamiliar. I felt tremendously homesick and nothing seemed to appear in the least pleasant to me. I had had a separate room back at home and now I had to share my hostel room with another guy. I felt my privacy was at stake. I missed my parents, their care and love and home cooked food. The mess food was awful and I hated the typical north Indian cuisine. Everything around me seemed unbearable and the situation could have got worse if the study workload and stress had been excessive. However, being a student from Presidency, I felt I was ahead of many others in the class. Some of the material

"My journey from Presidency to Penn State has taught me multiple lessons of life. I believe I have not only gained knowledge in Economics but also far greater knowledge about various aspects of life"

that was being taught at DSE was already familiar to me, thanks to the faculty at Presidency who often went beyond the Calcutta University syllabus to give us a more complete and thorough understanding of the subject.

My college days had taught me to be confident and persistent. The determination that it instilled in me was my saviour. I made new friends and the roommate with whom I was initially so reluctant to share a room, is now one of my close friends. The hostel life, over time, became so lively that hostel mates were now my extended family. We spent countless nights chatting and enjoying ourselves and when I recollect those days I feel that it was one of the best times I had in my life.

This stint in Delhi taught me many lessons apart from the ones that earned me a degree from DSE. As a person I became smarter and more cautious in dealing with the

outside world, be it traveling alone or taking care of myself whatever the circumstances. I started to understand the value of one's own home and the unconditional love of parents. During my college days I often got irritated with my parents even at their slightest disagreement with my plans, be it going out with friends or watching a late night movie. However, this stay away from home made me realize the value of my parents and made a better person of me. I learnt humility and the ability to adjust to different conditions.

The experience that I had as a student at DSE was different from the one at Presidency. College was more like a home to me with my teachers as my parents. They were always there to guide and advise me on any issues, be it academic or personal. However, the warmth that I felt back at Presidency was somehow missing in Delhi. This might be due to the fact that the class at Presidency comprised 40 students while at DSE it was 150. The personal bonding that I shared with my teachers in college is something that I treasure even today. However DSE exposed me to the international academic world. We often had seminars and conferences where the majority of the speakers were from reputed universities across the globe.

I wished to continue with academics, to do a Ph.D in Economics, thanks to my teachers back at college, who were the primary architects of instilling this dream in me and making me feel that I was capable of achieving it. Since most of the faculty had completed their doctoral studies

abroad, they could easily explain to me the requirements that I needed to fulfil to apply for graduate studies in a top school in the US. Also, often the alumni who were doing a Ph.D in the US or had completed one would come back to DSE and share their experiences with the students. So this gave me a fair picture of what it would take to do a Ph.D from a US university. The faculty at DSE helped me to select the list of universities I should apply to since it is never an easy task to select the list of "correct" universities. By "correct" I mean where I stood some chance of getting selected, since admission is highly competitive in a PhD program in a top school in the US.

I finally got admission to the doctoral program at Penn State University. This was my first experience outside India. Though I had now stayed three years away from home, two years at DSE and another year in working in Delhi, this seemed to be a completely different experience. I was certainly not as homesick as I had been when I first landed at Delhi nor was I as nervous although I knew that I had to make a new beginning.

My Ph.D cohort included students from Korea, China, Japan, Iran, Turkey, Argentina, Ukraine and Russia. There were two other students from India apart from me. Initially one naturally tends to bond with fellow country mates, but over time when I made friends with people from other countries I was exposed to many languages, customs, festivals, food, social norms, etc. I realised

the importance of and respect for different perspectives and ways of life. Living in a multi cultural setting helped me to develop a new set of skills and perspective about life. I learnt to understand that life is not all about career and achieving a target but it is beyond that. When I heard stories about the hardships that a student from Iran had to go through to reach the Ph.D program, I felt so lucky that it had been such a smooth journey for me.

On the other hand the challenge of living in a foreign country cannot be underestimated. Leaving behind one's family and friends 13,000 kms away can sometimes be a daunting task and needs mental strength. I stayed for 5 years in the US as a student in a rented apartment. As a student back in India I had never cooked, cleaned my rooms or done any household chores. The life of a doctoral student in the US is quite different. Apart from the long hours of study, one needs to take care of everything, from grocery, cooking, cleaning the apartment, washing clothes to any household chore one can think of. This is definitely not an easy task when you need to complete your assignments, projects, exams and simultaneously feel the stress to obtain good grades in your coursework.

The doctoral program in the US is very well structured but comes with a lot of work and stress. The two initial years are for course work and the next

three years are spent writing the dissertation. High-quality PhD programmes aim to develop independent, intellectual minds. The rigour of academic training was nothing compared to what I had seen before. The passion of the faculty members amazed me. We had a professor who was aged 75 years and was more active in teaching and research than many of the students. They are top professionals in their respective fields - scientific minds, persuasive speakers, and eloquent writers. There, I learnt what professionalism means. PhD students were trained to develop highest-quality knowledge independently. In that sense, the programme trained me to be an entrepreneur - to design, manage and deliver my projects. Now, when I am back to India as a faculty, I feel our programmes here lack the intensity and rigour, which is very necessary for writing a good dissertation. However, relations with the faculty were very professional but at the same time they were very helpful whenever I needed any academic advice.

During my students days at Penn State I met some brilliant minds that could think incredibly fast. Meeting such motivated people and hearing their ideas was a constant source of energy. The time that I spent as a student gave me an excellent exposure to academia besides teaching me how to be more acceptable in a multi cultural setting. My experience as a student in the US taught me to become a good

"...the challenge of living in a foreign country cannot be underestimated. Leaving behind one's family and friends 13,000 kms away can sometimes be a daunting task and needs mental strength"

judge of people and situations. I had grown and developed.

Now I am back in India as a faculty after spending a decade as a student in these three great institutions. When I sit back and think, all three contributed in many ways to making me what I am today. They not only contributed towards my career but had an immense impact on my growing up as a person. Presidency taught me how to dream and be confident about achieving the dream, DSE made me a more self-reliant person and hard working while Penn State taught me to realize my skills and develop them. Having spent the last 10 years outside home and in different places, I have now learnt to accept varied cultures, social norms and all kinds of differences, but the love for my city and its life has never faded away.