Seasons In The Sun : Memories of Presidency College, 1986-89

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I might never have lived these times. Had I studied hard for my higher secondary exams, I might have never studied Lefebvres; success with physics, chemistry, mathematics and statistics would have made me an engineer or a scientist. But I had no success with Einstein or Avogadro. I escaped from them into books of poetry and essays at a neighbour's house, and sometimes listened in amazement to his talk about Presidency College where he had once taught History. Booted out of the Jadavpur University interview section and refused a form at St. Xaviers, at Presidency I qualified in the admission test for not only English but also History.

For the first few months as a student of History, I attended every teacher's classes. Some of them made plain their disgust at my rank stupidities, and I ceased to attend their classes. I pretended that the other teachers, totally unconcerned about my idiocy, liked and appreciated my genius. So, I attended their classes.

The rest of the class quickly slipped into a groove that I later realised was the sole method of study. Every student bought a little book of University exams questions from the stalls outside Calcutta University. From this book everyone, aided by the teachers, prepared a list of probable questions for our exam. Next, they went about methodically collecting answers to them from their seniors. Then they set about preparing answers to the questions that still remained.

Our teachers were more or less resigned to the system. Indeed, some of the teachers contributed actively to its perpetuation by providing their own list of probable questions, and dictating answers for these. There were other teachers who were ill at ease with this system. They tried to treat topics so that some sort of a logical thread ran through them, and dealt with perspectives that went beyond the scope of B. A. questions. They would not dictate answers. Their classes were attended, their notes were taken down, but their portions in the exam papers were avoided scrupulously.

Only a miniscule minority studied for the college exams. Qualifying for the B.A. exam was never a problem. Three twenty-marks questions were attempted by most. Fifty per cent marks in these three answers fetched pass marks. This was a cakewalk.

The value of tutorials of the history department varied according to the professor one had been assigned to for tutorials. Some professors were in great demand. Some other professors assigned remarkably convoluted questions and almost everyone groped in confusion. The professors, best for the tutorials, assigned broad essays on general topics and evaluated them with grades. In fact, if all students can be made to submit tutorials, a large number of students who decide to put off studying till a month before the B. A. exam will perforce have to work. This is possible, if fifty per cent weightage in annual and qualifying examinations is given to tutorial performances.

I was the Seminar Secretary of my batch, 1986-89. As far as arranging seminars went, my performance was bad. But I did certain other things rather well. I was good at extracting seminar library fines. I tried my best to drum up enthusiasm among my contemporaries for a student's seminar, but failed. At every seminar, I efficiently undertook

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certain background activities. I would steal a blackboard from the Union room (the department did not possess one) to write out a notice and leave it in the portico at considerable physical risk. The revolutionaries in that room did not take kindly to their stuff being used for the cause of bourgeois discussions. I would order coffee with Promodda in the canteen, after having extracted outstanding fines to pay for it. I would then receive the lecturer for the day at the foot of the stairs, and lead him to the staff room. On the way, friends from other departments would stop me and loudly ask the latest about my romance, or any such things that might detract from the dignity of the situation. The most unpleasant task was to herd my fellow students from various corners of the college into the lecture room, to ensure a presentable attendance. This often led to unfair charges of authoritarianism.

The strength of the Seminar is the support given by the teachers, and the element of democracy in every aspect of its functioning. The weakness is that students are on the whole unable to comprehend how, apart from providing a library, it is of any use to them.

There were two libraries for our use – the huge general library downstairs and our own little Seminar Library upstairs. No one read full books in either library; one "did reference". This consisted of marking out, with the help of pencilled first brackets, the exact required sentence-to-sentence portion in the books, and then copying that portion down word for word for later interpolation in the answers. The Seminar Library had a modest collection, and each copy of the popular text books was in great demand. Downstairs, the aged librarians became friends of ours, knew each one of us by name and supplied us the catalogue number for each book from memory – a real feat, given the size of the library. One group would try to keep some books to themselves by keeping them by turns among themselves, while some other group would try to foil them through strategic demand slip production. The library, of course, was not complete without the library maniacs and library romances. There were those who lived in the library; they did not go anywhere else except to attend class.

We were different, no doubt, Blue jeans and check shirts, padded sneakers formed our attire. It was not just that, though. I think we represented a certain new kind of thinking. Our life in college was languid, our attitudes cynical. We were unhurried in our assessment of every situation, and our final comment on everything from bombing on College Street to news of an Indian cricket victory was "cool".

In some cases, our tastes were fashioned by what the girls liked. When Prof. Sukanta Chowdhury published his translation of "Abol Tabol", the English department girls swooned for a week. The very next week they were subjected to a barrage of Edward Lear and Lewis Caroll which the boys "happened to know" and compared most favourably with Prof Chowdhury's translation. Drug addiction did not reach our group; we looked upon such things as "Phoney" and enjoyed treating drug addicts as lower beings than us. One of our chief claims to preponderance in college was that we dominated at the inter-college festivals with our performances. We won prizes for everything from balloon-balancing to debating, but our special supremacy was reserved for the quiz contest. We also monopolised the creative writing contests in various festivals. We mostly wrote nonsense prose, something we had consciously tried to develop. Sometimes of course, our pieces stole the spirit of Catcher in the Rye, and mixed it up with Paul Simon or Vikram Seth-like lyricism; plagiarism at its absolute height.

Economic consideration had little to do with our preponderance; there were many in college far more well off than us. Most of us ran up huge debts with Promodda in the canteen.

The canteen was, as far as we were concerned, the nerve-centre of Presidencian existence. In appearance, it had nothing of the intellectual ambience of the Coffee House

across the street. Promodda, who ran the canteen, would sit adding up tab after tab. There were two rows of broken tables and long benches to sit at. The walls were rendered invisible by posters. While the rest of the college was plastered with political posters, the canteen posters had nothing to do with politics. Some were artistic, done with paper cuttings and carrying strange legends (borrowed from Bob Dylan or Pink Floyd hits) such as "synchronise with the rising of the Moon" or "In time of the breaking of the Sun". Some would simply give advance notice of coming festivals, or invite quizzards to the weekly quiz. For a large number of students, a typical day would begin with a small cup of tea here. Some made the canteen their haunt. They would sit at the tables, feet up on the benches, enveloped by the grey smoke from the adjoining kitchen. For hours, they would converse, never about anything in particular – serious matters, frivolous affairs, private romances, personal tragedies – every thing, and the smoke gently percolated through their brains, rendering them incapable of systematic concern for anything.

The student community at Presidency in our time had three broad divisions, viz., a group representing the rootless directionless generation, a second group studying hard and having little time for anything else, and a third group indulging in politics.

Of these, the second section was the most numerous. Their methods of study were almost invariably examination-oriented. There were, however, brilliant exceptions – a few students who would delve into a subject as deep as the teachers could take them and sometimes, beyond.

The various humanities departments were filled mostly by girls. Their few boys were either refugees from disasters with science at the previous stage, or were sons of established academicians grown up in an atmosphere of history, literature or philosophy. Most of the girls had been allowed to venture out of protective family barriers for the first time and their reaction to bus-rides all by oneself, frequent visits to the cinema with friends, getting caught up in politics or learning the choicest Bengali and English abuses were often comical.

The girls, in the long run, always proved to be more disciplined and diligent. They also made far better use of their new-found independence. They multiplied their ambitions manifold, secured admission in Universities abroad, successfully overcame family pressures to get them back to domestic cocoons, and charted out clear careers. The not-so-bright students among the girls were not resigned to their fate; most of them joined new kinds of professions such as hotel management, commercial art, and various jobs at the burgeoning advertising agencies. Quite a large number of them became journalists in premier Calcutta dailies.

The science departments were filled with the hard-working "sloggers". Most of them were from outside Calcutta. Although they scored very heavily in the Higher Secondary exam, unfamiliarity with English put them at a disadvantage in the engineering and medical entrance exams. They took up residence at the Eden Hindu Hostel. After three years of dedicated study, most of them left for higher studies at various Indian institutes. The canteen did not exist for them, but they always excelled at the Annual Sports meet, a sadly neglected event in our college.

America was the place to "land up" in. USEFI was a weekly piigrimage for many students, and quite a fortune was spent on the expensive application procedure. It is not as though everyone was looking for better education – the applications were almost always headed for second or even third rate colleges. In the three years that I was in college only two Presidencians made it to the Ivy League (though I can offhand remember a hundred students who left for the US) – one whose father was then working at Harvard

made it to Harvard, and another made it to Princeton via two years of M.Tech. at IIT, Kanpur.

The cream of the humanities section usually looked for a future in teaching or higher studies and research. Oxford and Cambridge were their destinations. Many of them did their graduation all over again.

Apart from the canteen ghosts and the sloggers, a third group at Presidency were those who indulged in politics. The group, deeply divided into students' organisations, consisted of students mostly from Bengali-medium school backgrounds.

Politics in Presidency College consisted of a constant effort to mobilise student opinion in favour of various shades of Marxism. The Naxals were apologies of their erstwhile extremist image. The students wing of the CPI(M) was often flummoxed by the logic that they could not very well create a revolution on their own while their seniors were busy perpetuating their hold on Writers' Building in the most ardently conservative spirit. Both groups identified the "black hand of American imperialists" as the prime cause of all problems, from Indian poverty and Bofors to the misplaced fan blades in the library and the non-working of the xerox-machine. There were posters all over college asking us to "smash" the black hand of the US imperialists and to stand beside the people of Nicaragua. Boys and girls of both groups wrote thematically predictable poetry and their output was truly prodigious. There were those who tried to write "different" poetry with incomprehensible passages and references to puranic characters. There would always be a reference to the "red sun". They sang awkward Bengali translations of leftist songs from many parts of the world. They did not undertake any serious study of Marxism. "Bourgeois" was a favourite word which described quite a lot, including the annual Presidency cricket tournament. During the election week in the college, they would come up to non-political students to canvass for their organisations or for themselves. But otherwise, they would not say much to those who were not interested in what went on inside the green doors of the Union room. Sometimes the two groups would fight between themselves.

Only once during my time in College was there any direct conflict between these politicians and the non-political dominant minority – our group. As we were busy organising our annual festival, they insisted that we should not hold a western music competition. They said that the programme attracted drug-addicts and drunkards from outside, which was really quite true. But even when we devised a foolproof method of selective admission to the programme, they continued to insist on the cancellation of the programme. Many bitter arguments later, they decided to hold a "parallel" programme in the field. It was a cold night, and as the packed hall clapped to wild rock music, five or six of them sat shivering in the field, tinkering with a kartal, and occasionally breaking into a folk tune.

Presidency College has peculiar implications for the city. People are aware of the fact that the college has sent great men into the world, men of whom they are proud. But they are also aware that these men have been of no consequence to them – the social reformers of the earliest years, the nationalist leaders, the professional luminaries, the scholars, the authors, the teachers, the naxalites, even the very first President of India have all failed to deliver the goods.

We always evoked a mixed response wherever we went outside the college. The name "Presidency" always brought on a satisfactory look of respect on the faces of outsiders. Some would tell us what a great college we were from; others would ask us probing questions about what methods of study we followed or what books we read. Coffee House was still linked to our college. There was, however, a growing tendency to compare us with boys in Delhi and Madras,

who, we were repeatedly told, were "far less talented" but were "much more professional". In our time, the Presidency-Xaverian rivalry had been replaced by Presidency-Jadavpur rivalry. The index of superiority that we competed for was a vaguely conceptualised "maturity". This consisted in reading more "eso" (teric) stuff than the other, and watching more "Antel" (intellectual) films than the other. One of them would tell one of us condescendingly that the previous night he had finished Umberto Eco's "Name of the Rose" upon which one of us, his heart dancing but his face grim, would inform their man that "Focault's pendulum was much better. His latest, you know." We ran a Kurosawa retrospective at Baker hall. They showed Polanski's "Knife in the Water" next Tuesday.