

SIDDHARTHA SANKAR RAY

auf wiedersehen Manuda

Bivas Chaudhuri* and Urmi Chatterji**

'Goodbye to the illustrious and evergreen friend of Presidency Alumni'

– as written on the wreath offered by alumni association

The first meet

Siddhartha Sankar Ray had always been closely associated with the Presidency College Alumni Association. We were organizing the Bijoya Sammilani program at Calcutta Club in 2007 and decided that we would arrange an *adda* session that year. In that context, Anindya (Shri Anindya Mitra) fixed the appointment and we went to meet him at his historical residence at Beltala. We were warmly received and ushered into his living room soon after. The journey up the ethnic wooden stairs to the living room was slightly delayed on our part, since prized photographs on the walls caught our immediate attention and blatant scrutiny. Little later, a rare Bengali figure walked in with a gorgeous smile on his face and outstretched arms. We immediately felt the warmth of a senior alumnus and any trepidation of meeting a former Chief Minister or a Governor or an ambassador disappeared. His 'height' was unmistakable. To make things easier, he even assured us that he would be offended if we didn't address him as 'Manuda', much to our delight.

His love as well as attachment for Presidency College was revealed as our conversation proceeded over impeccably served cups of tea and cakes. We requested him to participate in the *adda* at Bijoya Sammilani to ruminate memories of his college days. His eyes glittered. His reminiscences fascinated us, as did his simplicity and candid confessions of college-day peccadilloes. He spoke at great length about his teachers, his love of sports, his interaction with the belles, who he regretted were far less in number as compared to the present day, and how the times have changed ever since he graduated from Presidency College. We admired his memory and sense of humor.....secretly admitting that he was as 'mischievous' as we were. He proudly informed us he was three times University Blue, the

position till date unachieved by any one. He was the team captain of Presidency College football team, a position also held by his father during his days. He showed us some rare photographs, one of which was baby Siddhartha sitting on the lap of Subhas Chandra Bose. We were soon joined by Mayadi and the tête-à-tête become even more enjoyable with Mayadi's little anecdotes that bridged the information gap. She teased Manuda by stating that she was a better student, which Manuda admitted unhesitatingly. Manuda jokingly informed us that 'my batch mate Pratap (Pratap Chander Chandra) took all the medals and I got all the trophies from the college'. He mused over *jnandar cha-er dokan* in the college which was soon closed by the Principal as some students used to take beer there.

Manuda was a major attraction at the Bijoya Sammilani that year. Amongst other things, he emphasized on how constructive *adda* and *Tasha-o-bodh* were essential for the proper modelling of young minds....little realizing how his words heartened the young generation much to the chagrin of the then Principal. He sang *purano shei diner kotha* during the closing ceremony along with everybody. He even opted for taking a lady's hand while alighting from the stage and stated with twinkling eyes that it was chivalry unexplored. Rathin Sengupta was also around. He called us and introduced him as 'the best Chief Secretary ever'. The bijoya crowd was awestruck by his presence and interaction. We never saw such an attractive personality in our alumni function ever. That was the last function of the alumni association that Manuda had attended.

The last meeting

It was in the news for quite some time, and then it was finally out. The long battle of the alumni association yielded results. Presidency College was granted the stature of a unitary University and the search was on for the first Vice-Chancellor of the University. As members of the Alumni Association, we planned to visit the Chief Minister to state our choice on the selection criteria. We demanded that the VC should be an alumnus with outstanding academic stature and above narrow partisan line. We also sought for representation of the association in University management. We decided to approach Manuda to support our cause and lead the delegation as the senior most alumnus present. When we met him, albeit being really sick, he greeted us with his usual charm and called Mayadi to join. He was visibly happy that a present-day college teacher (Prabir Dasgupta) went to

meet him personally and it also gave Rupadi (Rupa Bandyopadhyay) an opportunity to request him to write his first ever article in our forthcoming Autumn Annual. What an evening that was! Many untold pages of history unfolded before us. He told us that he would donate some photographs of his time in the college to the alumni association. He agreed to our proposal of penning an article for autumn annual. He asked us to fix a date after *bhai phonta* when we could meet him and record his recollections. Alas, he slept the sleep that knows no waking on *bhai phonta* day.

During every adda, he would refer to Jyoti Basu. There was no exception that evening. The most publicized story of Jyoti Basu hiding in his residence during emergency was reiterated. He narrated that one morning ‘Dodo (Snehangshu Acharya) came to me’ and informed that Jyoti was coming to town, whereas there was an arrest warrant pending against him. I had to ensure his safe passage to the city from the airport. ‘It was Jyoti, so I had to go’. He took his car up to the tarmac in the airport. When Jyoti Basu arrived, they took him in the car and asked him to lie down on the floor of the car so that no one could see that Jyoti Basu was inside the car when the car left the airport. Jyotibabu was brought to his residence where he stayed for three days. He cracked another story with Jyoti Basu. During a function in Chandannagore which both attended together, beautiful young girls wanted their autographs. One girl wanted Jyotibabu to write something in her book, but he refused. Later, when Manuda reprimanded Jyotibabu for breaking the young girl’s heart by not writing something, Jyotibabu confessed that he could not write Bengali properly. ‘Actually Jyoti was more a Xaverian than a Presidencian’. He said that Jyotibabu took admission in Presidency College to get chance to study law at UK. He even shared with us that, during the Bangladesh war, on request from Indira Gandhi, he actually crossed border in anonymity from Tripura to address a gathering of mukti-jodha. ‘That was essential to restore their faith on the Indian commitment’. He was escorted just by one Indian military aide and one famous war hero of Mukti Bahini, all in disguise. No serving CM would ever do this risking his own life.

‘How dare Buddha call you to Writers’ buildings?’, thundered Manuda when we told him about our plan of submitting a deputation to the CM on the Vice-Chancellor issue. ‘He

should go to the college himself and talk to you people'. He was ready to lead the delegation to meet the CM on this matter. He read our petition and agreed in principal to our demands. Notwithstanding being physically infirm, his commitment and love for college amazed us. He insisted that he would take permission from his doctor to accompany us. Mayadi supported that he was on dialysis but could manage for a couple of hours. However, when he heard that we were going to Writers' buildings, he was taken aback. He insisted that Buddha should not call the Presidency College Alumni Association to his office. We pacified him stating that actually we sought an appointment with the CM at his office, which he appreciated but added that in principle, he never visited a place or office after relinquishing his official charge. He never visited Writers' after 1977, Punjab after his governorship and US after his term was over. 'Well, I may break this principle just once...I may attend the oath taking ceremony of Mamata next year', murmured Manuda. He however agreed to write a letter to the CM which we would carry and hand it over to him during our visit. His letter, addressing the CM as 'Dear Buddha' and ending with 'Yours ever' was like any senior alumnus advising his junior. Nevertheless he did mention that had he been the Chief Minister, he would have visited the college himself to express his joy and accept congratulations from the students and the alumni. Before we left his august company that evening, he once again promised to meet us to hand over the photographs and consolidate 'his-story' for the autumn annual....a meeting that was to never happen.

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"Don't offer a white wreath to Manuda", said our President Anindyada with a heavy heart. "He was a successful, extraordinary and evergreen personality, leaving for heavenly abode. Offer him the brightest flowers". We did just the same in paying our last tribute to one of the greatest legends of Indian polity and to our very own Manuda!

**Alumnus 1980-1983 (Statistics) **Alumnus 1986-1989 (Zoology)*