

SOME MEMORIES OF PRESIDENCY COLLEGE



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I was student of Presidency College in the Economics Department during the period 1979-1982. I faintly remember my first entry into the institution. We applicants had gone up the stairs of the Main Building and waited in the long queue for depositing the forms for admission; I had applied for admission to the subjects Economics and Statistics. The admission tests were held in the library room on the first floor of the Baker Laboratory Extension building. Many students had assembled during the test. The brightest students would opt for general education in addition to the engineering and medical courses.

Presidency College, with its hoary past, was still an institution of great reckoning. The turbulent days of the Naxalite movement were over and there was an attempt to impart good education—it was indeed a premier government college. During the admission test it was a sea of human heads—boys and girls writing their answer-scripts silently. I had studied at Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission earlier and was somewhat in two minds about moving to the new ambience of Presidency College. Narendrapur, after all, had a fairly good college as well and the professors there were eager to have me as a student. It was my mother who took the final decision. She felt that I had had enough of the regimented purity of a Ramakrishna Mission school and it was time to step out into the big, complex outside world. My father was also instrumental in my moving towards the somewhat unorthodox subject—he had probably sensed that I would fare better moving away from the crowded areas of Physics, Chemistry and Biology.

I stood sixth in the Economics admission test list and it was an achievement that proved to be decisive. I also secured the fourth position at the Statistics admission test and I was left vacillating on which of the two subjects would be finally suitable for me. I chose the former—partly because my maternal elder sister had studied the subject earlier and I knew some of her friends who had studied at Presidency, and, also because I had studied Economics at my Higher Secondary level. I had been negligent during some of the school years and it was only in the twelfth standard that I had pulled my socks and concentrated in my studies. That however, was not enough and my results at the Higher

Secondary level were far from brilliant. The Presidency admission results increased my confidence. Only a few of the top students at the Economics admission test were allowed to take up Statistics as a pass subject in addition to Mathematics. Since I already had Statistics at the earlier level, it was an option that I exercised immediately.

The Economics department in those days had a team of dedicated teachers. Dipak Banerjee was the head of the department. With an impeccable English accent, DB was a character that drew awe and admiration. He was keen to teach us some of the rudimentary elements of matrix, determinant, vector and scalar so that we were prepared for listening to the economic theories, specially microeconomics and macroeconomics. Mihir Rakshit was another senior teacher who taught us macroeconomics from the books by Ackley and Branson. Mihir Babu was a reputed economist and he was very regular for the class. It was his sincerity which impressed us, although we found his exposition of the subject very good as well. Nabendu Sen was another senior teacher. His area of specialization was Indian economics and I still remember his vivid discussion following the books by Dhires Bhattacharya and Amiya Bagchi. Prahlad Jana specialized in Development Economics. He was a teacher who still dressed in dhoti and panjabi and it was only later that I came to know he was an ex-student of Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, the college which I am serving for almost 22 years now. Amita Dutta also taught us, although probably for a few months only [I remembered her when our classmates uploaded photos of departmental tours on the Facebook recently]. I still remember her as an old-school economist, fluent in the use of the English language but uncomfortable with the intricate mathematics [Too much use of such tools `disturbs the spirit of the subject, for Economics after all is a social science!'] There were a number of part-time teachers, some of whom are now established professors at institutes of higher education. I remember Anup Sinha, Anindya Sen, Bibek Debroy, Jayasree Dutta and Amitabha Chatterjee—most of whom were ex-students of the departments and had come back to their own college for gaining teaching experience.

Economics department boasted of a great legacy. Amartya Sen and Sukhomoy Chakraborty had been fellow students

at this department, while Tapas Mazumder and Bhabatosh Dutta had taught there when it carved out a distinct entity away from the department of Political Science. A large number of ex-students of the department excelled at the higher levels of research in Economics. The text books that we read during the course largely used the neo-classical framework, specially the theoretical papers—Microeconomics and Macroeconomics. Development and Indian Economics were still growing as independent papers. In these branches, information was often more important than specific models. The farm size vs productivity model of Sen was rather an aberration than the general norm. Todaro and Mynt were the standard books for development and articles in the Economic & Political Weekly supplemented the text books on Indian Economics and development. Pramit Chaudhuri's book on the Indian economy came as a fresh whiff of air. The economic histories of Great Britain (Phyllis Deane!) and Soviet Russia were parts of the syllabus. Very few of us went for private tuitions and reading the text-books were great pleasures that we enjoyed during the examinations. In our third year, we consulted edited books published by Penguin and Oxford University Press to nourish our knowledge of the burden of taxation. I had studied the M Sc course at Calcutta University later. But the undergraduate teaching at the Presidency College was certainly brighter than the PG teaching at Calcutta University, where the large number of students often made quality teaching difficult for the professors.

At the college my biggest revelation was the leisure hours beyond the economics classes. After the huge play fields at Narendrapur the scanty sports arrangements in the college seemed lacklustre. I took part in the inter department football competition and still remember the frantic support of our departmental boys and girls when there were matches with other departments like Physics and Geology. Geology was then an all boys department many of whom came from the districts. They were the champion team in football. Table tennis competition was organized by the students' union but it was a scrappy affair. I also remember a collective reading of poems in which I took part in the first year. I also escorted Dipali Nag, the reputed classical singer, who came as a judge for the music competition at the college.

One thing which struck me was that the teachers were mostly confined to their departmental works and would take almost no interest in these activities of the students. The culture at Presidency College precluded them from involving themselves in these 'extra-curricular' activities. Many of the student inmates came from good and disciplined schools and the new found independence in the college would suddenly sweep them off their feet. For many, the college provided them the first opportunity to study in the company of the opposite sex. A large number of students spent considerable time in the college canteen and skipping regular classes. I often felt that a more pro-active administration could bring about an overall good for the students of the college.

The Main Building of the college was located at a considerable distance from the economics department; we would mostly visit this administrative hub during our

Mathematics Pass and Language classes. I indeed have no recollection of the Principal of the college although I have a faint memory of having gone to his office once. The college was hemmed by the Hare school on one side and the Hindu school on the other. The Calcutta University was located on the other side of a narrow road. The Statistics department, located on the second floor on a building overseeing this road, was small and compact; a place where I could rest my nerves. This department, because of the compulsions of practicals, could only take in a few students. One of the teachers of the department, Biswanath Das (BD), is now the President of the Alumni Association of Vidyamandira. In the meantime, I had been drawn to the ideals of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and was pleasantly surprised when I met Lakshmi Vaidyanathan (LV), one of the teachers of Mathematics of the college, at the Institute of Culture one day. I would carry a photo of Sri Ramakrishna to the college which I would look at occasionally. I still laugh as I remember the inquisitive glance of one of my fellow students when she saw me eyeing this photo between classes one day!

Presidency College was set up originally as the Hindu College in 1817 and was conferred its name in 1855 when the administration of the college was taken over by the then government. It was then that the doors of the college were opened to students of all castes and religions. Swami Vivekananda had studied in this college for a short period but had to move to the Scottish Church College when he fell short of attendance because of illness. This College, in contrast to the institutions under the Ramakrishna Mission, does not look up to specific personalities for inspiration. Instead, it carries the motto of imparting of liberal education in science and arts subjects to all deserving boys and girls. With the upgradation of the college to a unitary university, the future of the institution appears to be a bright one. In course of time it should expand into a bigger campus where the great potential that this institution has, can be realized.

Economics (1979-1982)