

That College, Those Days

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“Let the word go forth, from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans.”

“Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

June 1988. Calcutta, India. A young boy, only in the second year of college, sits riveted in front of the video screen at the American Center as he watches a recording of the Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, 35th president of the United States. During a college examination six months later, he writes in reply to a question on the functions and powers of the American president, “The president of the United States is the leader of the free world.”

When the results are announced, he finds he has been severely penalized for writing that, the “offending” statement has been struck off by the examiner, and he has received poor grades in that course. Worse, when he enquires from the examiner (a professor in the college) where he went wrong, he is seriously reprimanded, and advised not to repeat his “offence” in future written examinations.

That boy, born in faraway Calcutta twenty-four days after the death of Sen. Robert F. “Bobby” Kennedy (D-NY) in Los Angeles (CA), now reminisces about his college days sitting in his chamber at New Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). That college, located on 86/1 College Street and now a university, is fresh in his mind. So are the days spent there as an undergraduate student in the Department of Political Science.

When we were students at JNU, there were many from “Presi” studying in the different Centers (mostly in Economics) and adorning the rooms of the various halls of residence in the scenic and

sprawling campus. Ideologically, most belonged to the Left and some to the revolutionary Left. Very few made an attempt to justify the bombings in North Vietnam in the 1960s, lesser still had the courage to support President Reagan’s call to tear down the Berlin Wall in the 1980s. Posters condemning American imperialism were pasted all over the campus. They still are.

At university, not many were impressed with my ideological credentials, more so since I was from “Presi”. Looking upon me as an obnoxious, conservative American stooge, they knew only two ways of dealing with me: shunning me in public and deriding me in private. It became increasingly evident that a totalitarian ideology does influence one’s choice of friends. Worse, it imposes a kind of ideo-centrism, a feeling of “us” and “them” determined by political ideals, that even William Graham Sumner (the father of “ethnocentrism”) could never imagine.

But then, Presidency was different. That is what everyone says: our college was different. College life did indeed revolve around “prem, politics, pawrashuno” (love, politics, studies) for almost everyone. I do not know how many succeeded in all the three. A principal of the college was the father of statistics in modern India; subsequently Presidency has produced many celebrated statisticians. An

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attempt must be made to map the success of Presidency students in those spheres within a reasonable time frame. The results, I am sure, will make for interesting reading.

"To those whom much is given, much is expected." Presidency indeed meant "much". The pressure of catching up with professionally successful seniors did exist, if not the pressure of succeeding in love or politics. I do not think anyone ever tried to use Presidency as a launching pad for a political career. But the college indeed had students who had chosen careers they never

thought of when they roamed its hallowed precincts during their undergraduate years. I am one of them. Nor do I think that the late Satyajit Ray, who studied Economics (Honors) in the college, had taken the final decision to become a film-maker when he was in Presidency. Make no mistake: I am not comparing myself with the great man. As a childhood friend, who, by a stroke of remarkable coincidence, studied Economics (Honors) in Presidency too, rightly observed, my similarity with Ray ends with the name. Incidentally, both of us remain ardent admirers of that giant among men, and I am proud my name bears a similarity to his.

I seldom find an occasion to visit my native Kolkata (or should we still call it Calcutta?) nowadays, let alone visit the college. Sometimes I see the college on television, making news not always for the best of reasons. I still remember that the 175th anniversary celebrations had to be deferred because of the widespread communal rioting that followed the destruction of Babar's mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. Despite everything, the college finds mention in numerous stories, novels, films, and memoirs.

We are reminded time and again that India's first president was a student of Presidency. He indeed was. So was A. K. Fazlul Huq, the man who moved the Pakistan Resolution in Lahore in 1940 that ultimately led to the communal partition of the sub-continent.

Despite political differences, there is no doubt that both were brilliant men. There is yet a third, another President: "His Excellency" Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, head of the Provisional Government of Free India (1943-45). Not many talk about Bose's recognition as a head of state. But the Provisional Government did have diplomatic relations with a host of independent nations, according to Bose's head of state status within a limited sphere.

Most interestingly, it was the same Babu Rajendra Prasad, India's first president, who took over as president of the Indian National Congress after Bose resigned from that post in 1939. Most regrettably, Prasad expelled Bose from the Congress shortly thereafter. Prasad, who was a friend of Bose's elder brother Sarat during their days in Presidency College, calls this expulsion of Subhas Bose in his hands an "unpleasant task" (Prasad, *Autobiography*, p. 468-70). It would not be impertinent to mention here that it was Sarat Bose who had floated the idea of an independent Bengal outside both India and Pakistan in 1947. Though supported by Huseyn "Shaheed" Suhrawardy, premier of Bengal, the idea found few takers within both the Congress and the Moslem League.

There is no doubt that from the time it was founded, Hindoo (and then Presidency) College was in the forefront of the movement

to shape the "modern" Indian mind. Modernity does have liberal and Marxist connotations, and students and teachers belonging to both persuasions have contributed their bit to help establish a modern society in India. But then, a society in which both privileges and disadvantages based on birth exist cannot be considered modern, regardless of the increase in purchasing power of individuals. Group inequality and social exclusion are yet to be eradicated from India [Thorat and Sabharwal (eds.), *Bridging the Social Gap: Perspectives on Dalit*

Empowerment]. Till the time that happens, Indian society cannot be called modern.

Presidency always had students from varied economic and caste backgrounds, though mostly from West Bengal. Only after we graduated and joined other institutions of higher learning outside Calcutta were we made conscious of our religious, caste, and ethnic identities. As for our beloved college, if we forget aberrant ideological behavior of the type mentioned in the beginning of this article,

it never allowed us to be affected by prejudice, inequality, discrimination, and exclusion of any notorious kind. And that is what has made our three-year stay in and perennial association with the college, all the more pleasant and enriching.

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