

A Recall

RAKHI SARKAR

In hindsight, it seems, our batch of '64-'67 did not fare too badly. Sougata Roy, Aparna Sen, Amit Mitra and Partha Chatterjee (the academician) are just a few names most would recognize, yet there are umpteen scientists, bureaucrats, journalists, actors and bankers spread across the world who have brought glory to our institution. Above all, most of us cutting across genders, have also made successful homemakers we are all proud of, raising generation next.

I was approached to write this piece essentially to recall our years in Presidency. Not to forget, that I will be referring to times bereft of Twitter, Facebook and mobiles. Our world was still one of slow motion. My writing skills have withered and therefore, like the innocent Charu of Charulata, having failed to find an appropriate swing, I decided to use the sanctum of my daughter's residence in Delhi to do some earnest 'recall'.

Having led a rather protected life throughout my school days, Presidency ushered in a breath of fresh air. As a young woman / student, it felt like entering a

public stage as it were, for the first time. Still relatively naïve, and totally unacquainted with the negotiations of the Calcutta public conveyance (Modern High School, my alma mater was a stone's throw from home), I was dismally ill equipped to meet the challenges and vagaries of the public domain. Very soon, however, while acquainting myself with the corridors of Baker Laboratories, I mastered the art of adda which thrived at the gastronomical centres surrounding Presidency. Gyanbabu's cabin served the best kasha mangsho. Dilkhusa came up with the delicious kabiraji cutlets (not to enquire on the recipe, it was intensely multilayered and complex). The joint, still remains memorable for the dingy compartments with dark curtains, providing refuge to lovelorn couples and hiding the subtle goings on in the inner chambers; the alu chop man near the coffee house staircase, could safely feature on a food programme in one of the electronic channels. There was of course, Paragon, which served a yogurt based magic potion. What color was added and whether the filthy baltis from where the drinks were served had ever been sterilized, were

issues stubbornly ignored. What mattered was, the drinks were to die for and five decades later we are still alive. In final analysis, Coffee House (though a trifle cliché) was a great institution specially for naive teenagers like us. It introduced us to quintessential Bangalee adda and came to be esteemed as a production house of intellectual discourse and revolutionary ideas.

I have yet to mention the muri man and the chola man. One story comes to mind. On a sultry afternoon, after long hours at the Baker labs, a group of girls and I visited the muri man for a quick respite. On our way back, through the main staircase to the girls' common room, we were suddenly confronted, (like a Shakespearean apparition), by Dr. Sivtosh Mukherjee (of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee lineage). He stopped us with an abrupt wave of his hands, and for the next fifteen minutes bombarded the group with high decibel reprimand, for defiling the reputation of the esteemed MAIN STAIRCASE. The sum total, 'How could we ever inflict insult on the hallowed memories of all the great personalities who frequented the staircase before us, by making it a jhal muri joint!' As we stammered and looked sheepishly for help, came the final affront; a group of rude senior boys watching and jeering at our misfortune. That was the end of jhal muri on the stairs of Presidency.

Some more rapid flashbacks: stately Baker verandahs; devouring achaar (catered by College Street Market) in the enchanting old lecture theatres

“... ‘How could we ever inflict insult on the hallowed memories of all the great personalities who frequented the staircase before us, by making it a jhal muri joint!’”

and getting shamelessly caught; crowded girl's common room with claustrophobic loos; the naxalite Asim Chatterjee's brainwashing lessons (along the entrance of the college) on the fundamentals of ultra left philosophy; trepidation following adda amidst cigarette smoking students on the college grounds; lovers chatting across Corinthian pillars; special classes at Dr. C.T. Datta's residence on erstwhile Wellington Square while strike raged in the college campus; boys shielding girls while commuting on the double decker buses; bunking classes to watch Pataudi at Eden gardens and Dev Anand's Jewel Thief (my first Hindi film); disappearing pantuas and milk of magnesia tablets during excursion time on the banks of Chilka lake; the

fast forward can go on and on ensuring memories, friendships and associations were forged for life!

Fun apart, what is my biggest take back from those years? One can safely say, it was the space the college provided us with - magnanimous, free, liberal and a vital ground for fostering independent thought and our right to believe in it. So much so, that the Asim Chatterjees (of naxalite fame) Saugata Roys, Amit Mitras, Partha Chatterjees (the academician) and simple mortals like us could co-exist, learn, share, cherish and grow every minute. On the other hand, the likes of Sivtosh Mukherjee, Tarak Das, Dr. Chakraborty (Head, Botany department), Bimal Jalan enriched hundreds of us by opening the doors and windows of our minds. While Dr Sanat Basu (our principal) was indeed forced to spend several hours under the greenwood trees lining the pavement of Presidency, he was never subjected to physical harm, nor did he ever get the police masquerading on the campus grounds. After confronting a major episode of dharna, he continued gleefully for months together, plastering the college grounds with hilarious notices - “The grounds are meant for professors and girls to loiter around”. To be honest, that notice could have

been the handiwork of a modestly lettered office bearer, but Sanat babu had to bear the brunt of it for the rest of his term, and poking fun at the bright mathematician, never really ceased during the rest of his tenure.

Coming back to the liberal ambience – it was indeed vital for preserving the sanctity of a thoroughly democratic modern India. It was that liberal space of free debate that got systematically diminished and eroded over the following years and today it is almost nonexistent. Throughout Indian educational institutions what we are in effect fostering is a spirit of appeasement of forces at the helm, and ensuring a systematic denigration of the shared values of a vibrant pluralist society; both, dangerous and undesirable!

In my small way, I cherish being a free thinking soul. I owe it significantly to the values imbibed during those Presidency years – brief yet profoundly inspiring. Years, essentially serving as a stepping stone to our subsequent enquiries into life and of making sense of it. Our convictions and everything we ever stood for, stemmed from those years of initiation in tolerance and a right to question, objectives pursued by Presidency and all our professors, so assiduously. They prepared us to live life on our own terms.