



A Time Too Long Ago

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We used to play a fair bit of cricket on the basketball court laid out at one end of our cricket field. The court we used as a pitch. The bounce was true, and the ball came off it quickly. One sunny autumn afternoon in 1989, as I was about to crouch into my stance in readiness for the next ball, I heard a familiar voice calling out my name.

The batsman used to take his position on the edge of the field, close to the wire mesh that separated the field from the path that looped around towards Derozio Hall. I uncrouched from my stance and turned around. Across the mesh of wire, her face wreathed in a welcoming smile, was the late, great Kajal Sengupta.

“Come, come, let us do our tutorial,” she said. And when I remained silent (sheepishness had got my tongue), “Please. Please.” I had been caught playing truant. My tutor, having caught me out, was beseeching me as though she were doing me a favour. We went for the tutorial. I had no words for this sort of thing at the time. I still don’t.

Kajaldi (she was older than my mother, but no student had ever called her anything but Kajaldi) was my tutor in my first year in college. Towards the end of one of our first tutorials (we were discussing Wordsworth’s Preludes I seem to recall), she said, “What do you think of the text? Why aren’t you disagreeing with me?”

Disagree? I, the product of the West Bengal State Board of Higher Secondary Education, had been dutifully hanging on to her every word, taking prolific notes, hoping to reproduce verbatim what she had been saying. Disagree with a teacher? I didn’t know that that was permissible, let alone encouraged.

“You’ll have to learn to think for yourself,” she said. She taught me how. As did my other tutors, Sukanta

Chaudhuri and Kalidas Bose. It is hard to forget Kalidas Bose’s tutorials, stretching long after official college hours were over, twilight gathering, the tinkling of tram bells on College Street audible above his voice, reduced to a stage whisper, teaching his beloved Joseph Conrad.

Thinking for oneself is an acquired skill. As is close reading. There was a great premium on both things at Presidency College. We learned how to parse texts; we learned how, if one paid really close attention to words, they yielded their meaning, their essence – and how, the meaning and the essence could be not quite what you thought they were when you first encountered the words. I sought and found worlds within words.

Other worlds, too. They opened up in those two classrooms you came to on turning left after ascending the stairs on which Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose had ambushed the racist professor, EF Otten. I was a voracious reader by the time I arrived at college. But this was a different kind of reading. Sukanta Chaudhuri decreed that, for us to appreciate literature of the Renaissance, we had to have an understanding of the art and architecture of that period.

On a pavement bookstall in front of the college (in those days you found books there rather than self-help manuals), I found a copy of the Larousse Encyclopaedia of Renaissance and Baroque Art. And embarked on a new love affair. It was not just art. It had nothing directly to do with the syllabus either. I read psychology, philosophy, history, theology, film. I read widely and deeply.

I learned to appreciate European cinema. Our Saturday afternoon screenings at Derozio Hall led us through the oeuvres of Eisenstein, De Sica, Tarkovsky, Godard, Fellini, Antonioni, Rosellini. And when the international film festival came to town, my teachers assumed that I would be there – queuing for tickets from early in the morning

and watching films through the day – rather than in class.

My mind in those three years was being expanded in other ways. Badminton after a session with recreational substances. The swish of the racket a few seconds after the shuttle had arced downwards. The shot completed only after the feather was lying at my feet. Things slowing down, proceeding at a lag with actual time.

Unlike many, I do not consider my time at Presidency College as the best years of my life. Those would come later, much later. Those would come in finding a vocation,

becoming a published writer, making a happy marriage, discovering the unrivalled joy and pride of fatherhood.

But the years at Presidency, I feel, laid the foundation for all that. When I look back now, I think a line from John Le Carre best sums up what my period in college was all about. "It was too kind, too generous, too sudden, too long ago."

I graduated in 1992. In the twenty-four years since, I have rarely been back to Presidency College. But that is of little consequence. In a certain sense, I perhaps never left it.

