

After decades ...

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It was autumn 2013; I was taking the right alley on the ground-floor corridor to reach the elevator, leaving to the left the “magnificent” staircase, with the bell at its head, that Professor Taraknath Sen celebrates in his ruminations on the College building and the vibrant life within¹.

More than six decades between the mid-fifties of the last century, the time we moved along the steps, up or down, and the present moment – me, a metal stick in hand, wobbling towards the merciful elevator to take me upstairs to a meeting in the room of the Vice-Chancellor of the young University.

Memories overpower and time flashes back.

Here I had come seeking admission to the B. A. Hons. Course in English Literature, had my “interview” with Professor Subodh Chandra Sen Gupta – the experience an event by itself. Here in room nos. 22, 23, in the

small Seminar Library room and in the smaller cubicles in the Central Library downstairs, we learnt to read. The process for me started in the year of the Lord 1950 – 51; it continues. At the other end, at 81, I read on.

You throw a pebble on to a water-face: circles spread out, concentric and expanding. The decades in-between, I have been reading, with so many groups; those I read with have been reading with other groups in other institutions; and those in turn ... It feels amazing to be in the middle of this extending experience – particularly when, in a seminar session, for instance, I listen to one of my pupils reading and explicating. We had tried to transmit.

Yes, Presidency taught me, and us, how to read.

“How much” – did not matter, ought not to. It is the “how” that decided it all. At Presidency we never bothered about the “syllabus”, or the “course”, the

prescribed framework, that is. There was no question of “covering the syllabus”, no question of giving attention to the C. U. pattern of examinations. Concerns like these, if any, lurking in the corners of the mind, were propensities almost sinful. A senior colleague of mine, now aged 92, recalls the rebuff he had received just for mentioning one question set at the C.U. examination the previous year. Professor Tarak Nath Sen simply told him, with that look of well-considered decision in his eyes and a simple finality in his voice, that if C.U. questions were so important to him, the learner might as well stop attending his classes.

It all enchantingly blended into Cardinal Newman’s “idea of a University”, a cloistered world in which clocks do not mark hours, discourse begins but never ends, simply goes on, beats clock-time and calendar time.

At presidency we were in an exclusive enclave; at the entry point, if required, we had to unlearn to begin learning. Pragmatics of passing examinations and scoring high – all mundane and meagre -- implicitly thrown aside, what remained was a discipline to approach with reverential awe and a deep sense of humility.

Studying literature, we had to surrender to it.

¹ A Literary Miscellany, Rupa, Kolkata, 1972.

If it was the blank verse in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus or Shakespeare's Hamlet, we had to begin with Gorboduc and try to understand the difference between the jingling rhymes Marlowe mentions and the feeble early attempts to free the verse medium from the fetters rhyme imposes. We would engage in tracing the growth curve of English blank verse – playwrights, Marlowe, Shakespeare early, middle and late, Webster et al – and poets up to Tennyson. We would learn to read along “run-on lines”, through “enjambments”, counting “pauses” medial and spread-out, single and multiple, in lines packed with action, charged with emotion. Riding surges all along. Sessions of reading Meghnad Badh with Professor Janardan Chakravorty brought fullness and a sense of completion to the experience.

We would focus on the functionality of it all – pauses varied and in varying positions, lines of normal pentameter length and of shorter length. We would note along the way the genuine “short lines” in Shakespeare, lines that leave room for action – personae making an entrance and/or exit, strutting on the stage in excitement, arrogance, loaded with a sheer sense of power – and the half-line / part-line, for instance, joining with the next half / part coming in quick succession, reflecting emotional excitement, shared feeling or startled perception, as it might happen to be.

Poems would open up their inner drama – not only events, but interaction of emotions, moods, inner debates, the stops and stresses of the mind. Poems would come alive; the verbal structure, words laden with sensations, presenting a whole cosmos to enter into, to witness, in the full sense of the term. Reading poetry with Professor Tarapada Mukherjee in room no. 23, we would hear the autumn leaves rustling on the floor, as the bereaved youth, D.G. Rossetti's lover in the poem, tossed on his bed beneath the tree and dreamt on.

Yes, it was learning to converse with a text, making space for the text to speak, and launching on a dialogue with it; a dialogue co-terminus with life. “The play's the thing”, the Prince of Denmark had assured; the poem, the stanza, the line, the words in their positions, were “the thing” – we came to learn. The life of the poet, of his time, of remoter times the fables portrayed, political overtones, near and far away – everything was to be deciphered between the lines, between the words. In those pre-Derrida Pre-Stanley-Fish days the position and the presence of the text remained unquestioned, the focus undisturbed. No one raised the question, “Is there a text in the class?” The text was very much there; it was sacred. The text was the scripture in hand. The rest of the engagement, the laborious reference work in the library, recommended with meticulously selected, elaborate bibliographies,

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was studies around. All this was to be harnessed, in the right bibliographical format we had been initiated to in the beginning of our first year, in the exegetical unraveling of the intricate layers of meaning of the text in many folds.

Of course this induced no frigid finality; neither literature nor the study of it ever does. And when de-construction came, the modality of reading early adopted—delving deep into the assembly and the order of words – would discern subtle contrarities, fine fissure-lines, “cracks on the wall”, if so designated. With hermeneutics back again, newer emphases and tonal shifts noted, it is greater ease all around.

The pathway rightly in view, the journey definitely would proceed not merely within the academic enclave, but far beyond. Studying at Presidency, joining a discipline, truly was an event that offered a process of making, a shaping and moulding that nurtures sensibilities, draws

out the potential response and prepares not for exams, but for life. As Professor S. C. Sen Gupta never tired of pointing out, if to have scanned through Hamlet's dilemma, "To be, or not to be", or Macbeth's "If it were done when 'tis done..." made no difference in my perception of life, tinged not my response in crucial moments, why did I read literature at all?

We had come to acquire, to appropriate, to make it all our own.

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Winter hours on the sunny spacious ground in front of Baker Laboratories, then an open stretch, sitting in circles with roasted peanuts and peppery salt, or 'dulmoot', as accompaniments

affordable with limited pocket money, talking about... everything under the sun, stormy hours around marked tables at Coffee House, hours of treasure-hunt in the dusty stalls of old books – tramcars rattling behind, along College Street – an enchanted world. Ambience it is, literal and metaphorical. Once a denizen, one for life.