



Creating History

Presidency alumni and the transformation of India

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The alumni associations of Presidency University in Kolkata and Delhi, have chosen to observe the institution's bicentenary as a "celebration of excellence." The reason for this obviously lies in the achievements of its former students in diverse spheres as well as the role of the institution itself in shaping and sharpening their capabilities. Since splitting hair over words, concepts and their meanings is engaging but seldom rewarding, I would abort the exercise by stating that "celebration" here means "rejoicing" and "excellence", outstanding ability manifesting itself in landmark achievements. In terms of the latter, Presidency University's alumni have a distinguished record in fields as diverse as physics, biophysics, zoology, botany, literature, economics, cinema, social reform, governance and statesmanship.

The point that a section of critics make by implication is that these achievements, while admittedly considerable, have benefitted their authors and specific disciplines but not made the country a better place. This, it has been contended, is because of the elitist character of the institution and its alumni who have not been able to engage adequately and effectively with the people and society around them.

Bhadralok

The students and alumni of Presidency University have mostly come from the category of the *bhadralok* (literally, "gentle folk"). In *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, J.H. Broomfield has described the *bhadralok* as "a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent on landed rents and professional and clerical employment." He carefully distinguished between the *bhadralok* and the middle

class. According to him, the *bhadralok* were upper - and not middle class, if class was taken as a status group after Talcott Parsons. For, the category did not include many middle-class elements in the Marxian sense of the latter being an economic group, while encompassing persons from both higher and lower classes.

As a status group, the *bhadralok* constituted an elite which, in turn encompassed several elites comprising professionals like lawyers, doctors, teachers, landlords, businessmen, government employees and so on. Students and alumni of Presidency University, therefore, came from the ranks of the elites. Notwithstanding this, the contention that their elitist backgrounds prevented them from playing a transforming role in making India a better place, merits unceremonious *defenestration*. Particularly, the bit about the alumni not being able to empathise with the poor and the deprived collapses when one recalls that Dinabandhu Mitra, a playwright and prose-writer whose play, *Nil Darpan* (*Mirror of Indigo*), a searing indictment of the savage exploitation of Bengal and Bihar farmers by European indigo planters and their Indian agents, was an alumnus.

Besides, terms like "a better place" are not only vague but raise the question: Better in relation to what? An attempted answer would launch a thousand arguments which would only burn up the energies of their protagonists. Besides, the achievements of the alumni have not only enriched the diverse areas of their striving but catalysed changes beneficial to the society and polity to which they have belonged. Viewed thus, they have played a very important role in shaping modern India's history and culture.

The fact is that elites are **agents** both of societal and political

transformation and preserving the *status quo*. They run and change societies and lead revolutions. Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done*:

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in trade unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass the necessary labour legislation etc. The theory, of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of social democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working class movement, it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.

Modernising India

Presidency University and its alumni have contributed significantly to transforming India. Nothing underlines this more clearly than the role played by Raja Rammohan Roy, **one of those who took the lead in establishing** Hindu College, in India's transition to modernity. It earned him the sobriquet of "The Father of Modern India." He played a leading part in the abolition of the evil practice of *Sati*, promotion of widow remarriage, upholding of the freedom of the press, and the creation of one of the defining prerequisites of modernity--a climate of rational inquiry which subjected contemporary practices and received scriptural faith, to relentless scrutiny.

Also among the alumni was Swami Vivekananda, the strident voice of resurgent India, who was both an upholder and a searing critic of Hinduism of the day, spiritually and theologically crippled by an accumulated dross of superstition and its shocking indifference to the plight of the poor, if not exploitation of the latter. Utterly contemptuous of the prevailing taboos among the Hindus, an outspoken champion of Hindu-Muslim amity and communal harmony, he was an advocate of moral, spiritual, intellectual and physical strength ("biceps of steel" as he had once mentioned as what was needed), which he thought was an essential requirement for achieving emancipation.

If Rammohan Roy was the father of modern India, Swami Vivekananda had electrified and shaken the country, urging it to realise its latent greatness. Neither of them was in politics. Yet what they said and did had a profound impact on the latter which gradually became co-terminous with the freedom struggle as the 19th century rolled to its end and the 20th began unfolding. Rammohan Roy, who died in Bristol in 1832, did this by launching movements like the one for the abolition of *Sati*, which involved resort to polemic, petitioning, campaigning and the activism underlying all this. This familiarized not just the movement's leaders and participants but all socially-conscious elements with methods of conducting discourse and the mechanics of running movements which prepared the ground for their use during the freedom movement.

Swami Vivekananda's strident assertion of the greatness of Hinduism in fora like the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893, and the rapturous response it received, gave a massive boost to the sense of pride in their religion and heritage growing among the *Bhadralok* and other sections with the flowering of the Bengal Renaissance. His exhortations like the one to the valiant to cease dreaming and wake up now that the messenger of death stood near his head and fear did not befit him, pushed people toward a bold activism which also came to characterize their participation in the freedom struggle.

Role of the Renaissance

Rammohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda were primarily inspirational figures in the freedom movement whose emergence was a result of a number of factors, a critically important one being the Bengal Renaissance, the remarkable burst of multi-stream creativity that in many ways spearheaded India's transition into modernity which, in turn, was a response to the impact of Western ideas facilitated by the introduction of Western education through the medium of English language following the adoption by Governor-General William Cavendish Bentinck's Council, in 1835, of the famous Minute on Indian Education by Thomas Babington Macaulay, its Law Member.

The Renaissance was also a result of British rule, particularly of the social, economic and administrative consequences of its expansion leading to the establishment of a judicial system largely patterned after Britain's and the setting up of engineering, medical

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and other services. The result of all this, and the creation of supportive educational institutions like medical, engineering and law colleges, led to the rise of the practice of law, medicine, engineering, education, and governance, as distinct professions. Landowners, civil servants, lawyers, engineers, doctors and teachers, most of whom had passed through the portals of the Presidency College for some time at least before embarking on professional education, became the flag bearers of the Bengal Renaissance through not only their personal achievements but contribution to processes like the spread of higher education which extended the reach of the **Renaissance**.

One can argue that opposition to the British rule would have emerged even without it. The massive revolt of 1857 against East India Company's government had nothing to do with the Renaissance. The same applies to the struggle against the savage exploitation and oppression of the farmers of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa by the Indigo Planters, and several other peasant uprisings that had occurred. These revolts, however, failed. Their leaders could not match the British they faced in administrative, strategic and tactical ability. They had neither clear visions of the future nor coherent, comprehensive operational roadmaps to victory.

The Renaissance, and the educational infrastructure it rested on, enabled the rise of leaders with the required qualities. They were educated, could argue with their British opponents on equal terms, devise effective strategies and tactics and conceptualise plans of action on a large scale. A look at stalwarts like Surendranath Banerjee, Ananda Mohan Bose, Bipin Chandra Pal, Syama Prasad Mukherjee, Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das, Subhash

Chandra Bose, Babu Rajendra Prasad—all alumni of Presidency University--would make this clear.

Besides, the many achievements notched up during the Renaissance had given the *Bhadrakol* a feeling of confidence and self-worth. While Britishers like Sir William Jones, James Prinsep, William Carey, David Hare and Sir Edward Hyde East had contributed much to recovering the glories of India's past and spreading education, the Bengal Renaissance was essentially the work of the *Bhadrakol*. As a result, they felt that they were equals in intelligence and competence to the British who ruled over them, and should be treated as such. Having read the libertarian writings of people like James and John Stuart Mill, Rousseau and Voltaire, and also the promises in Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858, they thought they would be. They were not. Their effort to gain access to the highest level of the British governance structure, and particularly to the Indian Civil Service, the all-pervasive and all-powerful apex cadre of officials, and social and juridical equality, were rudely discouraged.

The Advent of Discontent

The lowering in 1877 of the age ceiling for appearing in the ICS examination was clearly meant to discourage Indian aspirants who had to travel to England to sit for it. The Arms Act of 1878 was grossly discriminatory to Indians whose right to possess and bear arms it severely restricted. The Vernacular Press Act of 1878 was aimed at stifling the Indian press. Anger among increasingly large sections of Indians because of these measures, was further stoked by the withdrawal of the Ilbert Bill in the teeth of furious opposition by Calcutta's European and Anglo-Indian communities. The Bill, introduced in 1883 by Courtenay Ilbert, Law Member in the viceroy, Lord Ripon's council, sought to withdraw the privilege granted to European British subjects in the districts of trial only by a judge of their race.

These, as well as other Indian grievances over issues like inadequate relief arrangements for the victims of severe famines which began occurring in the country with increasing frequency, led to protests and an intensification of the feeling that Indians must make their voices heard by the British government. Indeed, the feeling had been growing even during the East India Company's rule as a result of the interaction between the government and the rich and powerful landlord class,

created by the Permanent Settlement of 1793, and the emerging *bhadralok* community, increasingly prone to articulating their grievances and demands.

The first outcome of this was the establishment of the British Indian Association in October 1851 with Raja Radhakanta Deb, one of those who took the initiative to set up the Hindu College, as president. Not just that, alumni of the Presidency University played an important part in setting it up. **Raja Digambar Mitra, assistant secretary, and two members of the first committee, Ramgopal Ghosh and Peary Chand Mitra, were members of the group called Young Bengal and disciples of Derozio.** Another member, Prasanna Coomar Tagore, was also an alumnus of Hindu College.

The British Indian Association was, however, dominated by landlords and businessmen and mainly articulated their interests. Besides, it was widely felt that its members had too much at stake to speak out strongly against the British when necessary. The demand for another organization grew and, in 1877, Surendranath Banerjea and Ananda Mohan Bose established the Indian Association in Kolkata. Supported by younger elements, mainly professionals and the intelligentsia among the *bhadralok*, it adopted a clearly discernible political line in opposing the lowering of the age ceiling for the ICS examination, the Vernacular Press Act, the Arms Act and the withdrawal of the Ilbert Bill. In this, and in the extension of its units and activities outside Bengal, it did much to prepare the ground for the formation of the Indian National Congress in Mumbai in December, 1885, with which the struggle for the redressal of Indian grievances took a giant leap toward becoming one for India's complete independence from British rule.

Alumni to the Fore

Alumni of Presidency University played a critical role in the three main streams of the struggle—moderate, where the methods were representation and petitioning, extremist, where the emphasis was on confrontational action like boycotting and burning of foreign goods and strident protest demonstrations, and revolutionary, whose protagonists and practitioners believed that the British rule could only be ended through violence. Surendranath Banerjea was a very important leader of the moderates while Bipin Chandra Pal, along with Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai, led the extremists. The revolutionary movement attracted a number of alumni, the most

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prominent among were Ullaskar Dutta, who was sent to life imprisonment in the Andaman islands for involvement in the Alipore bomb case, and Nolini Kanta Gupta, another accused in the same case, **who** was acquitted after spending a year in jail.

Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das and Subhas Chandra Bose did not belong to any of the groups but treaded their own furrows within the Congress. Das along with Motilal Nehru and N.C. Kelkar, set up the Swarajya Party which functioned under the Congress umbrella. Bose, re-elected Congress president at the party's Tripuri session in 1939, was subsequently forced to resign following his conflict with Mahatma Gandhi and set up the Forward Bloc, which continues as a political party, albeit with much diminished presence,

As can be seen from the examples of Das and Bose, Presidency alumni's salience in national politics shrank with the rise of Mahatma Gandhi as the undisputed leader of the freedom struggle, and stalwarts like Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel increasingly coming to the fore. By Independence in 1947, the fulcrum of Indian politics had shifted outside Bengal, which became truncated into West Bengal, with two-thirds of the pre-Independence province becoming East Pakistan.

Not Just in India

Presidency University alumni, however, continued to have a significant presence in politics and governance not only in India but the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the first president of Independent India, Dr Rajendra Prasad, and the second

President of Bangladesh, Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, were alumni of Presidency University, the ranks of which also included the third prime minister of Pakistan, Shahebzada Mohammad Ali Bogra. Another outstanding alumnus was A.K. Fazlul Huq, whose political life straddled both India and Bangladesh. He was a mayor of Kolkata, prime minister of undivided Bengal, chief minister of East Bengal (As East Pakistan was initially called after Partition), home minister of Pakistan and governor of East Pakistan.

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The University has also accounted for a number of chief ministers. Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy laid the foundation of industrial development, power generation and urban renewal in West Bengal which, unfortunately, was not built upon following his passing in 1962. A second thrust for development came from Siddhartha Sankar Ray, who,

among other things, initiated the construction of the metro underground rapid transit system for Kolkata and several adjoining areas. Jyoti Basu, the longest serving chief minister in the country's history, who held office from 1977 to late 2000, belonged to the Communist Party of India (Marxist). He will be remembered for the sweeping land reforms that occurred under his charge and steady expansion of the metro rail system begun by Mr Siddhartha Sankar Ray who preceded him in office. His successor, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, was in office from late 2000 to early 2011.

Union ministers who have been the university's alumni include Dr Triguna Sen, Dr K. C. Neogy, Professor Humayun Kabir, Ashoke Kumar Sen and Dr Pratap Chandra Chunder. Somnath Chatterjee was Speaker of the Lok Sabha from 2004 to 2009, and remains the only person from West Bengal to have held that position. Coming to other states, Bishnuram Medhi, Chief Minister of Assam, was an alumnus, as was Anugrah Narayan Sinha, the first deputy Chief Minister of Bihar, who held office from 1947 to 1957.

The role of the alumni in statecraft and politics is important because those controlling their commanding heights play a major part in shaping societies and the lives of people. The policies they initiate and implement affect developments in the sciences where government funding of research and infrastructure is essential, and active nurturing by a liberal and democratic order is imperative for the blossoming of the arts which are stymied by censorship and indifference. Needless to say, Presidency University alumni have left very large footprints in both these arenas.

