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# Circles in Time

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It is not nostalgia – time did stand still when we were in college. The tower-clock of Presidency University – Presidency College in our times – gave the correct time twice a day. With sunlight touching its yellow and brown coloured surface, the clock looked out over the chaotic landscape of College Street with its noise, fumes, slow traffic, bookstalls, and the pedestrians trying to cross the street with the same alertness as *kho-kho* players invading the rival team’s turf.

Once inside the campus, past the gate and the amused stare of the legendary gateman Johnny reclining on his chair, looking like a character out of *Sholay* with his dhoti-kurta, *paan*-stained grin, and tousled white hair, it felt like being in a different world. Despite the campus not being as sprawling as that of rival Jadavpur University, it had its charm.

It was a rainy day in 1986 when I first set foot to the campus. Both my paternal and maternal grandfather were former students, as were many other relatives and family friends and so it almost seemed like a coming-of-age ritual. The history of the institution and the famous alumni – from Subhash Chandra Bose to Satyajit Ray, from Satyen Bose to Amartya Sen - created a halo that was enough to cover some of the visible signs of decay in the infrastructure to an eighteen-year old.

There was music in the canteen and (still) a whiff of revolution in the air. Nineteen Eighty-Nine, with the Tiananmen Square protests and the fall of the Berlin Wall, that would shake our political beliefs up, was still far away. The tumultuous days of the Naxalite movement was well past, but outside of Latin America, our college was possibly the first place in the world to put up posters protesting the arrest of Leftist guerrilla leaders in Nicaragua or Peru. As the Left Front was in power in West Bengal for almost a decade, being a leftist in Presidency meant being left-of-

the-CPI(M), a position occupied by a boutique collection of various radical outfits, all of which believed revolution was the true path to an ideal society, but differed in the details of the roadmap.

The conflicting pulls of canteen versus classes, *adda* versus activism, cultural pursuits versus romantic ones, defined our existential turbulence. We were just out of the regimented routines of school life and tasting the freedom of being an adult for the first time.

The college was fascinating as a social and cultural melting pot, and also, for those not from co-educational schools, in terms of intermixing of genders. But, there were social divisions as well. Those who were from English-medium schools (called the *Tyansh* crowd) were into quizzing, rock music, Groucho Marx and Jack Kerouac, while those who were from Bengali-medium schools (the *Bong* crowd) were into little magazines, Naxalite politics, and the poetry of Jeebananda Das or Shakti Chattopadhyay. But at least among the self-identified canteen crawlers Sukumar Ray, Salil Choudhury, Moheener Ghoraguli, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Ingmar Bergman, and Ritwik Ghatak provided sufficient points of common interest, not to mention shared intoxicating pursuits of intellectual and other kinds. In fact, I would say that the most visible group consisted of those like me who were staunchly bilingual, both literally as well as in terms of cultural preferences. For me, it was not just a matter of being fluent in two languages, or being comfortable in different social circles. In retrospect, I feel it was a matter of forming a core cultural identity that was genuinely bilingual and cosmopolitan, being rooted but branching out wherever there was light, refusing to be boxed in set social or cultural categories. This process was nurtured in the cigarette-smoke scented air of the canteen of Presidency College, much before the word “globalization” entered our everyday language, or “cosmopolitan”

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became synonymous with “rootless” in certain circles, or the internet and cable-TV brought the whole world to our fingertips.

In the Wild West those who can draw a gun fastest get the most respect, and in the canteen, it was a flair for wit and wordplay. Derrida and Foucault had not arrived in Kolkata yet, but Gabriel Garcia-Marquez and Umberto Eco had, and they, together with all-time classics Marx-Sartre-Camus-Gramsci, were compulsory reading for those with canteen-honours to qualify for being taken seriously intellectually. And while some forms of social snobbery were definitely present, it is fair to say that the appearance of being intelligent and well-read was the most respected social currency.

While memory does tend to remove the rough edges, it was not all sweet harmony, and there were tensions and contradictions that have become clearer with distance.

There was undoubtedly some contradiction between the comfortable and sheltered lives some of us lived and the politics we espoused. Shortly after being elected a class representative in my first year as a member of one of the many radical outfits in college (which, friends allege, had two and a half members other than me), I was seen smoking an expensive brand of a cigarette in the canteen, from a pack gifted by a friend who lived abroad, and teasingly told by a canteen-mate that a radical should not be enjoying these bourgeois luxuries. I quipped that as a radical, I wanted a society where everyone would be able to smoke such cigarettes. Since then I have quit smoking and my notion of an ideal of society has shifted somewhat. Still, while I did have a point – self-denial that is not useful to others does not really make sense – for me the story does highlight a certain tension between our professed views and our lifestyles.

Another incident I recall was involved a bunch of us

demonstrating against a particular member of the administrative staff for some alleged misdemeanour. Even with all the sincerity of a teenage activist, I could not help chuckling mentally at the somewhat absurd Sukumar Ray-esque scene that unfolded, with this gentleman sitting at his desk with a glum face as bright, well-dressed college students marched up and down the corridor chanting, “Shyamal tomar mundu chai, mundu dao” (Shyamal, we want your head, give us your head). Admittedly, it was not a reasonable demand that this gentleman could possibly comply with. Trouble started when a hot-headed student raised the ante by trying to break some furniture and all of us quickly disarmed him – after all most of us were well-behaved kids from good schools, and radicalism clearly had its limits.

A certain degree of cultural conformism – about what was considered good or cool – did permeate the air sometimes at the expense of discouraging original opinions and views. I was reminded by a certain cinephile friend about the time when a group of us had just come out of Baker Hall after watching Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*. Some of the film-buffs were raving about the film but not saying much beyond platitudes. Then the inimitable Shibuda (Shibabrata Gun, who studied Statistics and was a campus legend for his humour and erudition) rendered everyone speechless by quipping in salty colloquial Bengali, “What a film! Just like *Sholay*, everyone dies in the end!”

And then there were the classes. As the sequence of these recollections suggest, studies were not the top priority for some of us, at least in the early stages. Despite the attraction of various extracurricular activities, however, we were aware that bunking Honours classes was not a good idea (pass classes was another matter) and if we did, even Dilipda in the college office, a much beloved figure, would not be able to bail us out before the exams. While an instinct for self-preservation led me into the classroom, despite the temptations of the canteen, what kept me there was a growing fascination with the subject.

I chose economics even though literature was my first-love in school. I fell in love with mathematics in high school, under the influence of my High School teacher, Pinaki Mitra, a Presidency Mathematics-graduate and an Ishan scholar, who was a post-doctoral fellow in the Economics department for some time. At the same time, my nascent political yearnings drove me to try to understand the root causes of poverty and inequality. I was advised that eco-

nomics was the right subject for me and that Presidency's economics department had legendary teachers like the late Dipak Banerjee, Mihir Rakshit, and the late Nabendu Sen.

Dipak Banerjee, or DB as we all called him, with his baritone voice, resemblance to Cary Grant, and an inimitable swagger that was both aristocratic and cool, was not just the star of the Economics department, but also a college legend. My recollections about the Economics department invariably revolve round his larger-than-life persona.

At first his lectures were difficult to follow because he spoke with a thick British drawl. Once talking about gross and net income, he corrected a student: it is not "gross" as you would pronounce "cross" but as in "close", he insisted. But DB was no typical anglophile. It was part of his way of not settling for anything but the best in any domain, from his love for Indian classical music to getting a particular sweet only from *Balaram Mallick*, to insisting that we read the original economics classics like Hicks' *Value and Capital*, rather than textbooks.

His knowledge of Bengali literary classics was impeccable and he would often quiz us about the reference for a particular character or incident from them, or the meaning of some unusual Bengali word. He would also break into Bengali from time to time, especially in the tutorials he held in his spacious Head of Department's office, when using rather unusual examples to illustrate aspects of micro-economic theory, that he taught us in class. "Suppose you go to the *Chingrihata* bazar to buy some *uchchhe*," he once growled in chaste Bengali, "the price of which has gone up by 30%, would you buy more or less of *kumro*?" That, we were told, depended on how these vegetables were cooked in your house, and in particular, whether *uchchhe* and *kumro* were used together or separately in the curries! To this date, when I teach the concept of goods being complements or substitutes in people's preferences, I chuckle thinking of DB's example.

I could go on and on about DB. Once, when I asked him for some career advice, he said, "You should not go for a research-only career, because teaching is really important." I was beginning to feel moved by DB's commitment to teaching. But then he added, "Listen, research is hard. There will be days you will make no progress and you will feel you are no good. That is when you need students. Because teaching them will reveal there are others who know and understand even less than you and you will regain your confidence!" He would make fun of teachers as well.

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Once, when someone complained a certain teacher in another institution was skipping lectures, DB said confounded him by saying, "That is good." Then he said, "The chap would teach students wrong things if he did teach, so it is better this way!"

Despite his no-nonsense personality and sharp humour, DB was very kind and generous to students. If a student got into trouble (and, I am speaking from personal experience), DB could be trusted to bail the student out, even though the process involved a fair bit of dressing down as well. May be it was because he was not exactly a model "good boy" when he was a student in the college. He studied Chemistry but dropped out, to resurface later at the LSE as a star student of Economics after working his way to England on a cargo ship and doing sundry jobs in London. It was a significant moment for me -- a sense of a circle being completed -- when a bit more than a decade ago, he was passing through London and I accompanied him and his wife, Dr. Nirmala Banerjee, back to the LSE campus, where they first met as undergraduate students in the mid-1950s. That was his last visit to the LSE as he passed away in 2007.

DB presided over a department full of stellar teachers.

Mihir Rakshit (MKR) taught us macroeconomics. He was an active researcher, a policy advisor, and a big influence on those of us who went on to do research that tried to relate facts to theory. It was only later when I started working with Indian national income data that I fully realized how valuable his lectures were on national income accounting, which did seem a bit dry at that time. Nabendu Sen taught us economic history. Even though he was a bit shy in person, he was an eloquent speaker and kept us captivated when talking about topics such as the debate between Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy regarding the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism in Europe. Younger teachers

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like Anup Sinha and Soumyen Sikdar were lucid lecturers, and always willing to engage intellectually in and outside of the classroom, whatever topic was raised by some precocious student, from current politics to mathematical logic.

Without fully realizing it, being taught by teachers like these gave us a glimpse into the majesty and breadth of the discipline of Economics, far beyond the grim realities of syllabuses, textbooks, and examinations that were always lurking in the background. Also, while there were intellectual battles raging in the discipline at large, in terms of clashes between the Marxist and the mainstream approaches, we were never discouraged from raising questions on what was taught or from reading alternative viewpoints. What is more, we were always encouraged to read original articles and books rather than relying on textbooks or review articles. When I recall some of the conversations I had with my teachers, I marvel at how democratic they were in their intellectual approach, not shooing away any question as impertinent or irrelevant, but treating them on their merit.

When one thinks about it, it cannot be an accident that so many world-class economists have emerged from the dusty corridors of that relatively non-descript building in Central Calcutta. In my view, it was the leadership of DB, a truly first-rate faculty, and a certain departmental culture that made this possible. When DB conversationally mentioned something that Kenneth Arrow or John Hicks told

him, or a certain policy debate between Paul Samuelson and Milton Friedman that he once witnessed, he made us feel connected to a larger intellectual sphere, well beyond the boundaries of the college campus, and encouraged us to be intellectually ambitious.

For me, the influence of Presidency College extends beyond my direct teachers and peers. Even after I left college, many of my teachers, mentors, and co-authors have been Presidency alumni: the late Sukhamoy Chakrabarty and the late Mrinal Datta Chaudhuri, who taught me at the Delhi School of Economics; Amartya Sen and Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee who taught me at Harvard, with the latter also becoming my PhD co-supervisor there (later moving to MIT, where he has remained since), and who happened to be DB's elder son; Pranab Bardhan, Dilip Mookherjee, and Debraj Ray whom I have had the privilege of having as co-authors and mentors.

This August, when I entered through the gate bearing the famous address, 86/1 College Street, College Square, to give a set of guest lectures in the Economics Department, it suddenly occurred to me that it has been thirty years since I first set foot here. With some grey hair, and a lot less confidence in my own beliefs.

None of my teachers are around now – they have retired or moved or passed away. But there is still music and buzz in the canteen and assorted posters on the walls, brimming with protest and outrage, just like before.

When giving my lectures in the same classroom where I once sat in the student benches, another circle is completed for me. The faces of the students seem just the same, though. As they say, time does not change as much as we do.

The clock in the tower-clock has, however, been repaired a few years ago. Now it keeps correct time, I am told, and maybe even runs a few minutes fast. It is just as well. The current students belong to my children's generation. Over to them.

