

From Canteen to Linkedin –

How Social Media has Changed College Friendships

ANINDYA DUTTA

The Canteen Days

It's August 1985, and I enter the hallowed portico of Presidency College for the first time as a student. For someone who has been through eight schools in different parts of India, keeping pace with the dynamic career of my father, it's with mixed feelings that I take those first steps. On the one hand, it's an awe inspiring experience to climb up the steps where Subhas Chandra Bose allegedly heckled Prof. Oaten for racism, and was duly expelled, gaining instant fame. On the other, following in the footsteps of my father, joining an institution so steeped in history, and meeting some of the best students of my generation in India, is an exciting prospect indeed.

Within a couple of weeks, the kaleidoscopic political and social art on the walls of "Promod-da's Canteen", and the comfortably hard wooden benches against the

wall, have combined to create a cocoon of warmth, that not even the prospect of Prof. Mihir Rakshit (MKR) mentioning to my father (he was among MKR's first batch of students at the College) that he hasn't seen me for a while in the Economics Department, is enough to drag me to my classes, except when strictly necessary.

Two weeks later, I am in the audience at Kala Mandir to watch an inter-collegiate debate, the Presidency College team is a man short, and I volunteer to step in alongside Kaustav Neogi, a senior from the Economics Department. We win the Team trophy, and I am hooked on to yet another activity outside classes, which will compete with "quality Canteen time" over the next 3 years, as I team up with various debating partners to win trophies for the College. And so my circle of friends expands; with them I will end up spending some of the best hours of College life.

When I look back upon those 3 years now, memories jump out as if it all happened just yesterday, instead of 25 years ago. Most of the memories are centred around a close circle of friends. And while it could well be time and imagination playing tricks with my brain, virtually every event that I recall happened around the Canteen, which, by the time I came into Presidency, had taken over as the focal point of College life from the Indian Coffee House, where our previous generation had spent their Presidency days.

The 3 years of college, for me, as it is for most people, were the happiest, most carefree and memorable period of life outside the home. The competition and successes at the Inter-Collegiate Festivals, hundreds of evenings of "Nirbhejal Adda" at various friends' houses, hurrying to and fro from classes which were strictly unavoidable (either because we loved and respected the likes of Prof. Dipak Banerji and Prof. Nabendu Sen, to name just two, or because the class attendance numbers were too low for even the amazing Dilipda – Dilip Roy – to sort out!), the honour of editing the Presidency College Magazine, and the hours spent on the bench against the Canteen wall, singing, and debating world problems, seem but a dream today.

The "Go and build a career, son" Days

The next 15 or so years after Presidency seem to have melted away from most of our memories,

as far as college friendships and adda are concerned. At the time when each of us went our own way in specializing in certain fields, meeting up and/or formalizing existing relationships into marriages, building careers, and fighting the trench wars of life, some close college friendships remained alive, but most faded from memory. The one or two people in the once close knit group who were best at "keeping in touch", remained the link with most of the others. And the vicarious pleasure of following the lives of once-bosom-buddies through these conversations, remained at best an annual event, with "Coffee House er Sei Adda ta" playing nostalgically in the background.

And this is how it has been for generations. And this is perhaps how we envisaged it, in the fleeting moments in those intervening years that we spent fondly reflecting on the College days. But for my generation, this changed.

And then Social Media Changed it all.....

My father and his friends had to wait until they came back to Kolkata and neared retirement age before they had the luxury of re-connecting with friends who at one time virtually lived in each other's houses! But beginning in the late 1990's with the spread of the internet and advent of email, the connectivity between old friends suddenly became possible.

Friends you hadn't thought about for years, were popping out of the ether with comments on "Yahoo Groups" and sending across scanned copies of long lost faded photographs taken in the canteen a couple of decades before on a borrowed camera.

And then in the mid-Nineties, came Facebook and LinkedIn. And these were the real game changers.

Suddenly, the daily lives of people you last remembered bidding tearful farewells at the College gate, were once again connected with yours through the virtual world of Facebook. Receding (or non-existent) hairlines had replaced locks of uncut and unkempt hair, round faces and rounder bodies had replaced sunken cheeks and skeletal frames, and white sand beaches and snow-capped peaks formed the backdrop for people you last remembered sitting against Canteen walls plastered with posters in blood red oversized script. Wives and children (of both the two and four legged varieties) were introduced, first virtually, and then through physical addas and annual picnics. Bosom pals, separated by decades, found themselves to have been neighbours in distant lands, and never met, like passing ships at night. Personal lives suddenly became richer with the spark provided by old friendships, now renewed.

LinkedIn has had a similar impact, but with some crucial differences. Since not everyone who is on Facebook is on LinkedIn and vice

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versa, not only has this network allowed re-connection, but it has also provided a personal window into the professional lives of old friends. A "Presidency College Alumni" group now exists on LinkedIn and it can be used for networking in this difficult global job market.

Using Social Media to Bring the Alumni Together

The opportunities that the advent of social media provide need to be utilised for the betterment of the Alumni and the College (now University). About a year ago, through the Presidency group in LinkedIn, a few of us got together with the resolve to help the Alumni Association launch a new website that would eventually fundamentally change the way Presidencians across the world interact with each other and the alma mater. It's taken a while from the idea and conceptualisation stage, to raising funds for the new website (again through

appeal to friends through social media), to working with vendors in coming up with the product that we visualised, to finally launching it, hopefully in the coming weeks. Sandip Kar, Bivas Choudhury, Amit Chatterjee, Adheep Guptoo, myself, and the many who financially contributed to this effort, have a common vision. We envisage that Alumni will use the website to interact with each other, rediscover yet more lost friendships, help fellow Presidencians professionally through the strong "Presidencian" bond that we all share, and give back to the College and to current and future students, a little bit of the financial benefit that being a part of this hallowed institution has undoubtedly bestowed on many of us. This remains the hope and conviction of our little group.

The Journey

It has been a long journey for most of us from "Canteen to LinkedIn". Social media has changed the way we interact with people around us, but has even more fundamentally changed who we have in our lives during the journey.

In an age when families are smaller and physical distance between family members and friends is greater, social media has created a "Virtual Support System" which is proving invaluable. An ailing parent a thousand miles away, is a few minutes' help away for a close friend, who a few years ago was a teenage memory. A fleeting moment of joy, or a lingering feeling of sadness, can instantly be shared with like-minded friends, who will immediately understand the context. A struggle to land a job in a difficult market, can

become easier through a network, whether one's own or a friend's.

The virtual world is blending into the physical world of relationships. We are a generation that is privileged to be in the midst of this change. We have seen how our previous generation at Presidency coped with college friendships which de-linked and then re-connected decades later. And we have seen that gap bridged immeasurably by social media. The decades to come will bring more dramatic changes, but in this journey, we can truly claim to be the "Cusp" generation for whom, the two worlds have truly become one.

Alumnus (Economics/1985-88)

*Global Head, Private Banks
& Family Office Sales,
ANZ Singapore*