



|| FROM THE SECRETARY'S DESK ||

A Longing Lingering Look Behind

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There was no centenary celebration in the year 1917 because of the First World War. There was no sesquicentenary celebration in 1967 owing to the Naxalite movement in Kolkata, especially within the College. When during apparently peaceful circumstances, the quartoseptcentennial celebration was planned in the year 1992, the Babri Masjid incident shook the nation and the celebration was postponed to 1993.

Hope to ward off the jinx in the bicentenary year of our alma mater.

A few intellectuals felt that Hindoo College and Presidency College were not in continuum. They validated the centenary celebration of Presidency College in the year 1955. The historical records, however, exhibit enough evidence to justify the celebration of 200 Years of Excellence (1817-2017), describing a journey commencing from Hindoo College and arriving at Presidency University.

It is a curious tradition that we do not observe the Foundation Day of the institution. January 20 is observed as the Founders' Day. The College was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Radhakanta Deb, David Hare, Justice Sir Edward Hyde East, Baidyanath Mukhopadhyay and Rasamay Dutt, to all of whom we pay tribute on the occasion.

Every year, traditionally, the head of institution and the Executive Council of Presidency Alumni Association assemble in the Arts Library in the main building to pay tribute to the founders at the site of the foundation stone on January 20. This is followed by the Founders' Day meeting at the Derozio Hall. This is also the day for an Annual Reunion, organized by the Alumni Association.

Interestingly, the College had no alumni association for almost a century. A reunion of the alumni took place in 'Marakata Kunja' (Emerald Bower) of the Tagores on January 1, 1875. On January 20, 1915, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh took a lead and established an old Boys' Association. Still, nothing concrete came out of the move. In 1925, a similar initiative to form an alumni association taken by the same professor met with an identical fate. On March 20, 1926, some sort of an 'alumni meet' took place when the college arranged a gathering of 'veteran graduates of fifty years'.

A more organized attempt was made in 1934 and a Presidency College Association was formed with Surendra Nath Mallick as Chairman and Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis as Secretary. Unfortunately once again the endeavour proved to be abortive. On January 19, 1951, a meeting of the former students of the college was called by a press notice. It was held in the Physics Lecture Theatre with Mahmood Ahmad, the senior most alumnus in the chair. Amongst other agenda, the meeting set up an Organizing Committee with Atul Chandra Gupta as Chairman and Jatish Chandra Sengupta, the Principal of the College, as the Secretary.

On April 17, 1951, the Organizing Committee called a General Meeting of the members. Of the 300 alumni enrolled either as life or ordinary members, 117 attended that meeting. It was chaired by Satinath Ray. The first office bearers and members of the Executive Council were elected. The office bearers were: President: Atul Chandra Gupta, Vice-Presidents: Satinath Ray, Shyamaprasad Mukhopadhyay and Secretary: Jatish Chandra Sengupta, Principal. At long last Presidency College had got an

Alumni Association, which has been functioning without any interruption since its inception in 1951.

In the year 2010, the college was conferred the status of university. In June 2016 the association acquired a new office behind the Baker Laboratory building.

As they say, change is the only constant. Slowly and surely, the institution is taking new shape, with the objective of becoming a world class university - a centre of excellence. There is no hesitation in admitting that the present State government is generous in funding the institution. The most nostalgic domain of our youth has donned a new look. A section of the alumni is agitated over the changes in the main gate and portico, arguing that such acts disturb the heritage of an iconic institution.

The bicentenary celebration of the alumni association is special to all alumni who are nostalgic. It is an occasion for reconnecting with the past, a time for homecoming.

Another curious tradition of the alumni association is to grant membership to anyone who has taken admission in the college or university, even for a short period. The successful completion of a course is not at all a criterion. This perhaps is in keeping with the spirit of a remarkable institution whose dropouts are no less worthy than those that passed out of it. Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and many more remarkable personalities are in the list.

A student of Presidency College was known for his or her variety of interests and not just academic merit. The intellectual and creative manifestation of the students of this institution was more evident in their adda, the songs they sang, the graffiti they wrote on the walls, the magazines they brought out, the debates they participated in and even in the political contests of the students' union. The freedom to rebel and the urge to think out of the box were de rigueur in Hindoo-Presidency. Modernity and free thought were a lineage from the days of Derozio. The concoction of intellectual creativity, academic merit laced with trivial vices was a fatal attraction. A brilliant student of economics of the late '70s was once brought to the Hare Street Police Station for loitering on the streets in an inebriated condition. He recited from Thomas de Quincey's 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater' to the officer-in-charge to explain the correlation between creativity and addiction. The officer was so impressed that he asked his driver to drop him at his home.

There was another group of students at Presidency. They were meritorious but were isolated from the 'mainstream'. Though not necessarily subaltern, they were mostly from a rural background. Presidency was therefore not classless. Student politics was often based on such divide but it was not easy to predict, in general, who would subscribe to which political party: Chhatra Parishad or SFI or DSO or SA or IC. The chequered history of the college in grooming great political personalities cannot be ignored. The President of India (Dr. Rajendra Prasad), the President of Bangladesh (Abu Sayeed Chowdhury) and the Prime Minister of Pakistan (Muhammad Ali of Bogra) were alumni. The alumni list comprises three Chief Ministers of West Bengal, one Lok Sabha Speaker and several union and state ministers. There were many interesting twists in political beliefs also. Since the Naxalite movement in Presidency College was the most talked about in the history of student politics of the college, the stories are equally interesting. A staunch Naxalite leader of early '70s eventually became a senior police officer in the US; on the other hand, the son of a dreaded Police Commissioner of the early '70s was arrested from the college for his Naxalite connection.

Though the alumni have made their outstanding mark in almost every walk of life, there exists a bias towards the achievers in the academic field. Presidency prefers to showcase its academic power in the fields of science, social science, arts and literature, rather than those of politics and bureaucracy. Not that the aura of professionals was less but that the brilliance of academics was more dazzling in its domain.

Presidency has seen enough destruction during the days of the Naxalite movement. It has witnessed political plans to usurp academic excellence and autonomy in the name of egalitarianism. But surprisingly, nothing could wither the outstanding intellectual pursuit of the students. The Pierian Spring of knowledge and inspiration has flowed uninterrupted.

The alumni of Presidency in their gatherings often ruminate about the old days and one of the best story tellers is Dilipda. He remains a custodian of many untold facts and his vivid memory for anecdotes enlivens many an occasion. Dilipda has been in charge of the Alumni Office in Presidency Campus since his retirement from the college. An alumnus holds on to his or her days in Presidency. The bicentenary celebrations will create a rendezvous for all of them.

Alumni Association has taken various initiatives to celebrate the bicentenary. The 'Tribute to Bikash Roy' was a curtain raiser on December 18, 2016, at Nandan II. A short film, created by the Alumni Association on Bikash Roy, the legendary artist and alumnus, was screened alongside a discussion by Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Jagannath Bose and Jawhar Sircar.

The stage is set for the celebration of the 200th Founders' Day on January 20, 2017, at the Derozio Hall where Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Hon'ble President of India, and Dr Manmohan Singh, eminent scholar and former Prime Minister of India, have kindly consented to grace the occasion in the evening and the morning sessions, respectively. Ustad Rashid Khan will perform in the evening. Prof Sukanta Chaudhuri will receive the Atul

Chandra Gupta Distinguished Alumnus Award 2017 and Presidency Alumni Gold Medal and cash prizes of Rs. 25,000/- each will be awarded to the toppers in Arts and Science at the undergraduate levels in 2016.

The association has drawn up plans for iconic events through 2017 until January 20, 2018. Support has come from many unexpected quarters. The opportunity to witness and organise the bicentennial celebrations of the alma mater is a unique and life time opportunity for any alumnus to give back to it a tiny bit of what one has got.

The alumni association wishes a very happy new year to the Presidency family and invites all alumni and their family members, students, faculty and the staff of Presidency to join the bicentennial celebrations.

