

A TRAGEDY CALLED PRESIDENCY *Jawhar Sircar*

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The basic problem with Presidency College is that it transcended its role as a teaching institution more than 150 years ago during the Renaissance, and has had to live up to its role as the metaphor for the intellectual excellence of Bengal. There has been a concern over its falling standards for several decades since the Naxalite movement shattered education in Bengal, when we were students. But the fact that many in our generation still managed to come up in life may belie this judgement. It is, however, true that the Left government's anti elitist policies did hurt Presidency and we must also acknowledge that other colleges improved a lot — which is very good. Monopolies cannot continue for ever and democracy is meant to challenge privilege and monopoly. What hurt more was the untrammelled power that some teachers' associations enjoyed for almost 30 years. They tormented and demoralised several outstanding teachers of Presidency College who did not toe their line and utilised the 'circulatory transfer policy' for government college teachers to send many to Cooch Behar or Jhargram. They also managed to post some quite undeserving teachers into Presidency, but I have seen the-then CM struggle a lot to protect excellence in his alma mater. He finally managed to convince the hardliners to grant the college the status of a university in July 2010. The current chief minister, who came to power ten months later, went several steps ahead. She set up a Mentor Group within a month, under Sugata Bose and extended total support to Presidency. This Group included several excellent academics and Amartya Sen publicly backed the initiative.

But if so much assistance and importance is showered on Presidency, why is it that the university is failing in real terms —especially in the last few years? It is really painful to see that it does not appear among the first 100 best universities in the latest National Institutional Ranking of the Human Resources Development Ministry. Jadavpur university has stood 6th and Calcutta university is 14th, but Presidency is far behind Kayani and Burdwan universities. Dozens of lesser known universities have shamed Presidency — like Koneru Lakshmaiah University of Vaddeswaram, Algappa University of Karaikudi and even Mizoram University. The excuse given by the authorities is that it is a "new university" and therefore its position sank is just not acceptable. Two years ago, when it was even "newer", it managed to be among the first fifty in this prestigious ranking. The university authorities were so obsessed in spending many, many crores of public funds to convert the heritage buildings of Presidency to 5-star levels, much of it quite unnecessarily so, that they found little time to improve education and research. They were thrown out of the list of 100 best

universities and everyone is ashamed, except a rather peculiar Vice Chancellor, who parades her commercial tastes so proudly.

In the last three years, academic standards and the university's reputation has suffered as many outstanding teachers have left the university. Among them were senior reputed professors like Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Somak Roychowdhury, as well as several others, who were uncomfortable with the Vice Chancellor's style of functioning. Others who were approached by the Mentor Group and were giving Presidency a serious thought after a long time, just dropped the idea. Numerous posts of Distinguished Professors were created to attract talent but except one local professor, none joined or stayed back. Again, the reasons lie in the stifling atmosphere created. Teachers usually know how to get along with other professors, but even a non-academic like the present VC, who has worked mainly as a Central laboratory scientist, could have picked up this accommodative spirit in the last four years. She is now busy distributing an expensive, glossy coffee table book that the university has published for self publicity — like private companies do to impress banks for loans. Paradoxically, this book shows many of Bengal's icons who were once connected with Presidency, look rather sadly at departments like Mathematics, Statistics, English, Bengali, Philosophy and Sociology that are being run without a single Professor or even a senior Associate Professor. It goes to the credit of young Assistant Professors that they keeping the university going, along with a handful of seniors. This man-made crisis pushed down the university's score far below others, where the national grading body, NAAC, was concerned. Even the previous Presidency College, which had lesser support from the government, scored better in the NAAC grading. NAAC and NIFR just cannot understand why senior posts cannot be filled up — but we know.

Nor can the student community understand it and this frustration resulted in shocking numbers of vacant seats this year. A large part of the mess was, of course, due to bureaucratic handling by the authorities — and even the minister had to put in a strong request. We must remember that iconic colleges and universities the world over continue to excel more because of their students — the *creme de le creme* — that they attract. Despite a hundred problems, it is the energies that radiate when the sharpest brains of every generation assemble, argue and compete in the classrooms and corridors of historic colleges that keep the institutions so vibrant. The biggest fear is that such students are coming in lesser numbers and even those who do find themselves cribbed by an overwhelming 'domination syndrome' as hired guards keep saluting the university officials and watch all — which is totally unprecedented.

Hopes ran high when the Mentor Group was set up in 2011 and the press and public followed with interest developments and high profile visits. This Group, which lost and gained professors as it went along, submitted reports every six months but six and half years was much too long — as authorities tend to lose their sense of

urgency. Whatever improvement is possible has been suggested quite sincerely in the six parts of the Mentor Group's reports that run into 134 pages and has many more pages in the Annexures. But implementation was not directly the Group's responsibility — this was the Vice Chancellor's.. Here, two issues come to mind and the first is that except one member, no other academic in the Group has ever blackened his or her hands with real administration. This is a rather tricky and unpleasant job and good intentions are not substitutes for efficient execution. The second problem is that no University Act has any provision or role for a Mentor Group and under the law, universities are supervised by Executive Councils and Courts — by whatever names they are called. The minutes of these meetings in Presidency indicate that the VC got what she wanted — as unlike other universities, very few external members attended.

The VC's unilateral mode of deciding became public during the Bicentenary Celebrations and numerous senior persons were hurt as the 200 year institution was being converted into just one person's 'glory' mission. Presidency's unique advantage is that its Alumni consists of countless VCs — all more senior and experienced than the present incumbent — who were willing to help but were rudely ignored. Its Alumni has hundreds of other worthies, like judges, authors, intellectuals, journalists, advocates and administrators — who have a greater stake in the institution than a temporary head. What shocked thousands of alumni — to whom Presidency was not just a college but a veritable treasure of lifelong memories — was the gross commercial tastes that dominated this unilateral exercise of power. It was beyond anybody's imagination that a single individual could uproot the classic gate of the college, along with its sentinel tree that had seen so much of Bengal's history, just to erect a larger, tasteless entrance. Other historic bits and nooks of a college like the 'portico' where generations of students learnt how to articulate their arguments were treated with similar insensitivity and smashed by contractors, god knows why. Instead of improving research, which both NAAC and NIRF insist before reconsidering the university's rank and score, the ancient marble and beautiful old world cast-iron architecture of the iconic Baker Laboratory were ripped off. Priceless furniture and historic laboratory equipment that could adorn a museum, were sold off as scrap. Precious funds that could improve libraries and laboratories and help keep them open till late, as is done in the best foreign universities, were spent in paying contractors, but hostel students continue to suffer.

Poor Pramod da, whose canteen has been a part of the college heritage for several decades, was thrown out on flimsy grounds in a purely Tughlaqian style. Did the university need a monstrous piece of 'art' that looks like a pincushion with bent pins? The slightest question about why or how much it cost — how much public money was showered on which item and why — is met with tantrums and scorn. Even the legally-prescribed RTI procedure is not operationalised and the university does not post the names of the PIO and the Appellate Authority on its website —

unlike thousands of similar institutions. This is illegal. All public queries are just blocked by stony silence.

Though every sentence has hurt, they had to be mentioned —only to save the university from further damage. Never in the history of this 201-year old institution has a Vice Chancellor's house been raided by Income Tax officials — whatever be the reason. But all is not lost, as a new good team leader can clear the present mess, with more consideration and sincerity. Inefficiency can be cured, but it is doubtful whether insensitiveness can.

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