

Shantiniketan in 1959

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A few weeks ago, two dignified ladies met me to hand over a copy of a brochure, titled “Probodhchandradaya”. It was about Dr. P.C. Bagchi, the former Vice Chancellor of Visva Bharati. While flicking through the pages, I came across a photograph of Pandit Nehru sitting on a simple wooden bed, covered with a frugal white sheet and a few batik spreads, and a couple of pillows strewn behind and beside him. There were no crowds on the dais, which was obviously during the Convocation of Visva Bharati in (1954), and while the Upacharya, who was at the right corner of the photo, delivered his address over an ancient microphone, Panditji looked straight at the audience. There were no mobs milling around, nor any policemen, no pushy socio-academic climbers clambering on to the stage, no ministers, no bureaucrats, no aggressive photographers blocking everyone else’s view.

This photo brought back to me some of my earliest memories of Shantiniketan, way back in 1959. It must have been the 23rd of December as Visva Bharati’s Convocations were held on the 24th. I chanced to overhear my father and uncle deciding, quite on the spur of the moment, to go to Shantiniketan to hear Jawahar Lal Nehru speak at the Convocation. I was just seven years old and I tugged at their sleeves to please take me along with them. My brother was a year younger, and though he had no idea why dada was so keen to go, he would certainly not tolerate being left out of the ‘fun’. Little did he understand that I had my own special problems: my name (Jawahar Lal) meant so much to me, that I could not let go of this first opportunity to meet the person, after whom I had been christened. It was a different matter altogether that my name would be converted into a more Bengali ‘Jawhar’ in my school-leaving certificate, as it was closer to the local spelling ‘Jahar’. The middle name ‘Lal’, also disappeared some where along the way and I simply stopped using it. These distortions notwithstanding, I could never disown the fact that it was ‘Jawahar Lal Nehru’ after whom I had been named.

I had seen photographs of a genial Chacha Nehru, but never did I ever understand why I needed to carry the gentleman’s name. Yes: he was a great leader and also the Prime Minister of India, but would it not have been simpler to give me an easier name, like (say) Deepak or Raju? I would then not have to answer so many questions about what I knew about Jawaharlal Nehru and whether I would be a great man like him, etc., etc. But let us move: on to the train to Bolpur, that rushed through the green countryside, with all excitement of adventure which lay straight ahead. My brother and I switched seats near the window (quite often) and stretched our hands out to ‘catch the air’, as the train rolled along rural Bengal. The railway station at Bolpur greeted us with the mad honking of rickshaws and the ‘cling cling’ bells of a hundred cycles. My father and uncle stopped their cycle rickshaw, looking for a place to stay, but it was already too late. The only place one could stay for the night was as a guest of Visva Bharati, near Amra Kunja of Shantiniketan,

where the Convocation was to be held the next day. I came to learn that this house where we had put up for the night was called 'Singha Sadan'. It was a dormitory, where the entire floor was covered with hay and straw, with thick rugs over them, making the whole place a very spongy bed indeed. Gandhi and I kept jumping and bouncing on it. I forgot to mention : 'Gandhi' was my brother's name and I had another four year old brother named 'Subhas', after Netaji. We also had a little sister named 'Sarojini'. My father's national spirit thus went beyond his simple khadi shirts and it was inflicted on the names of his children, with so much patriotic fervor ! But then, we were too tired after the journey and had an early meal. We dozed off soon enough, after tickling each other for some time, with bits of straw that we had picked up. I still have hazy memories of that unique bed, because I never got to sleep on a bed of hay, ever after. The next flashback that I remember now is of sunlight, and my father shaking me awake and picking up little Gandhi in his arms, while everyone streamed out. People were moving to the pandal or shamiana, where the Convocation of Visva Bharati was being held, amidst the mango grove : the Amra Kunja. The small procession was moving past the 'Patha Bhavan', towards Amra Kunja and my father explained that these were the teachers and scholars of Visva Bharati, led by the venerable Upacharya. All of them looked a bit too gloomy to me and they had coloured sashes over their shoulders and down both sides of their body, right up to their waist, resting on their white panjabis or kurtas. These, I would learn later, were the famous uttariyas that are an integral part of Shantiniketan's heritage. But they did look a little funny to children, uninitiated into the finer aspects of culture and education. What I distinctly remember was the simple procession, that moved slowly towards, to an even simpler dais. What I also remember is that there were no mobs, or crowds, or policemen and battalion preventing the world from getting nearer the PM. But, I could not spot him. It was then that I heard Gandhi shriek : 'Dada, there is your great Jawaharlal'. Yes, unbelievable as it was, I was actually just within a few feet of the man about whom I had heard so much. Gandhi was always smarter than Jawahar ! In the instant case also, he dragged me nearer to the head of the procession. We sprinted a few feet to come nearer to Pandit Nehru. Then, before any one could realize what was happening, he slipped through the somber group, clutching me and forcing me in his manoeuvres, till he came right up to the PM (actually walking along with him) – before a puzzled Upacharya and the other scholars. I am sure they took a dim view of the whole affair, but in a flicker of the eye, he stretched his hand out, and believe me, Nehruji gave a broad smile and shook hands with him. I was too shy to repeat this gesture and therefore, my little brother jumped out and yanked me in and I fell back within touching distance of Jawaharlal Nehru. But, by then the volunteers moved in to restore order and the entourage moved on gravely as before. I could not muster the courage to extend my palm, for a repeat of my brother's sterling performance! It was too late, but I sprinted along, with the procession, for a few steps more. I think I saw Chacha Nehru turn his head to me and smile, just when an elderly hand plucked me out and handed me over to my father, baba could not make up his mind whether he was distressed with the episode, or pleased. He took both of us in his arms and Gandhi showed him, very proudly, the hand he had shaken, over and over again, while I philosophized over my fate. Absolutely childish! But that is the first and last memory that I have of seeing Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.