

EXCITEMENT HIGH AT PRESIDENCY (1970)

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Saturday, the 12th of Sept, in the year of our Lord, 1970, 1.20 PM. The giant gongs of the college bell float to our welcome ears in the Eco-Pol. Science portion of the West Block building — far, far from the Main building. The class over, the Professor picks up the attendance resister and makes short his exit. A few yawning and muscle-stretching seconds later, we get up, get out and start shuffling wearily across the sprawling green that isolates us from 'civilisation', i.e., the Main building. The silence is monotonous; poetic as some of the mod poets would say..... when ... when a deafening explosion blasts the peace into the past. Before you could say: Hey! Who's-blowing-his-top again, another, and yet another, of those ear-splitting louder-than-thunder explosions violently rock the century-old foundations of the college. Explosions are as much a part of College Street and Presidency College as much as the Coffee House "adda". But boy! These were some real groovy sounds. Many a heart-beat skipped its turn, and you could almost feel the sound crash against your poor heart.

Within seconds, tear gas shells burst into the air and those familiar clouds danced teasingly in the breeze. More bombs in succession and then came the sound we feared — the gun shots — one, two, three the bombs again tear-gas shells followed. Presidency College campus turned into an instant 'Saigon' as 'Vietcong-type' guerilla-students and armed police fought a bloody roof-to-roof, corner-to-corner, verandah-to-lawn duel with crackers, bombs, tear gas and gunshots

¹ A shorter version of this article was written on 17 Sept. 1970, when the author was an undergraduate student of 18 year, in the Political Science Department of Presidency College, Kolkata. Thereafter, this version of the article was published in the magazine of the Kolkata Presidency College Alumni Association, of New Delhi in October 1986. Then again, this was published in the Presidency College Alumni Association of 50 years (Golden Jubilee Souvenir) of the Department of Political Science of Presidency University (formerly Presidency College) in March 2011.

" While all the world wondered,
Volley'd and thundered
Stormed at with shot and shell
Plunged in the battery-smoke"

Well, what about the 'bourgeois' students like us, who were often the targets of frustrated 'revolutionaries' in their violent moods ? As you can guess, they RAN for all they were worth — which, incidentally is not too much. Vamoosed, back to the pavillion, the Eco-Pol. Science/West Block building, just as flustered bearers and trembling assistants were banging shut the doors and collapsible gates — amidst the screams of distressed damsels and the encouraging catcalls from the men (if you would like to call them so). It did not matter whether you were for or against these impromptu battles and for someone like me, who had been bashed up by the sons of Mao — one needed to be extra careful !

Safe and satisfied once again, and secure in this 'fortress', some opened the windows to watch the battle of 'Dienphienbhu' re-enacted before their blessed and lucky eyes.

Though much could not be seen because of those irritating fences, the overgrown creepers and that goalpost (god damn the whole lot !) more was heard. Policemen positioned themselves and fired at any shadow that moved on the veranda, while slippery students always seemed to shower bombs from somewhere behind them, whichever way they turned. Every explosion was greeted by whistles of praise and smiles of approval from uninvolved Presidencians — who had long ceased to gulp wide-eyed, at least as long as they were safe out of range. Soon, however, to the disappointment of many enthusiastic students, especially girls, (who were at last beginning to recognise the difference in the explosions — between those caused by 'patkas' (crackers) and those caused by 'petos' (bombs) — the experience came to an end as the sounds became less, and finally stopped. Probably out of 'ammo' — someone commented, rather gravely.

Buses and trams were off College Street as far as one could see. People were beginning to come out, as if nothing had happened — except that those who were going past the College gate had to put their hands up, which they did, with an almost bored everyday manner. The wheels of normal life creaked on slowly again. The gates of the West Block building were pushed open, and most students made a beeline for the back gate and thence to the Chittaranjan Avenue Bus stop. Some who had not yet not had enough, rushed to the main gate to inquire, only to be shooed off by the police. My friends and I stayed far away, as we had had bitter experiences, recently. And those poor souls who had shut themselves up in the Main building had to stay put for some time more, but they too were let off eventually by the authorities.

The epilogue : Headlines in the Sunday morning newspapers — "One Hurt in Firing"; "Bomb Attack on Policemen in College Campus", "Police Fire xyz Rounds", "Policemen Injured in Bomb Explosions" and so on. Ideal topics for Coffee House "adda" ; for letters to pen-pals and for serious talk at student gatherings. Monday and Tuesday College closed by the students — in all, four neat holidays. What more could the normal student ask for?

As for the cause of that day's sudden eruption, I asked many a young Che Guevara and got practically no answer. Well, with apologies to Tennyson, one could say :

"Theirs was not to reason why,
Theirs was to do and defy"