

Leaving Presidency College and
Traversing the World
Memoirs of a Social Scientist

Mihir Rakshit



ANUSTUP PRAKASHANI

2E, Nabin Kundu Lane

Kolkata-700 009

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Preface

This book is an epilogue to my earlier volume, entitled *The Village, The Town and the Metropolis: Memoirs of a Social Scientist*, published by *Anustup* in 2024 that relates to the episodes of my life in the village where I was brought up, my education at Serampore College, the four years at the Presidency College, Calcutta (including the years as a Presidency student at the Calcutta University's post-graduate economics department) and as a graduate student at the London School of Economics. The present volume contains the long experiences of my working life in Calcutta University, Burdwan University, Presidency College, Calcutta, The National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi, The Delhi School of Economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta and New Delhi, as Editor in Chief of *Money and Finance* and Head, Research Organization founded by the Investment and Credit Rating Agency and in the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai.

The final part of the present volume contains the poignant memory of my wife, Susmita.

Chapter One

Last Days at Presidency College

If I were to name one educational institution whose salubrious influence on my life has been invaluable, I would unhesitatingly say, Presidency College, Calcutta (PCC). I was a student at the college for four years; my period of teaching at PCC was much longer, twenty-six years, from 1965 to 1991. I have related in some detail my experience at the college, both as a student and as a teacher, in the earlier volume of my autobiography, entitled *The Village, the Town and the Metropolis: Memoirs of a Social Scientist*, published by Anustup. But in that book I left out the bitter memories of the last three-four years of the twenty six year period concerning the circumstances that forced me to leave the college; nor did I mention what happened during the last forty minutes before I left for Delhi to join the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP) — an event whose poignancy and bitter-sweet memory still make me emotional. In this chapter, I propose to relate what led to my resignation from the college and the poignant event. The second thing first.

An unusual and touching farewell

There was a custom at PCC that I wholeheartedly approved of: there was no formal farewell function when a teacher left the college. In Noapara, my village, when a teacher or someone else was going to another school or for higher studies, farewells were quite common. After attending a few of them, I got sick of such functions, especially of the same Rabindra-sangeet (Tagore-song) “*Bharaa thaak smriti-sudhaay hridayer patrakhaani*” (Let the heart’s vase remain full of sweet memories) every time. So, when students took no steps to bid me farewell, I heaved a sigh of relief. But I had a surprise waiting for me at the Howrah Station. A few minutes after I took my seat in the Rajdhani Express, a number of boys and girls came in, carrying huge bouquets of roses in all hues. There were three other passengers in the compartment. They must have been surprised that I was a teacher and might have felt that teaching was sufficiently rewarding for a teacher to outweigh his low pay. The students, I was relieved to find, did not get emotional; some of them wanted to know about the NIPFP (it was yet to be widely known). I told them I had taken leave from the college for two years, but would return after one year, and their faces lit up. That I could not keep my promise to them has been an abiding source of regret since I left the Presidency College.

Education and political machinations: The sad tale of the irreversible slide of Presidency College.

For historians and those who consider education as one of the most, if not the most, productive assets of a society, the story of how the unholy alliance between high government officials

and what I have called (in the first volume of my autobiography) teachers-turned-politicians (t-t-p's) and politicians-turned-teachers (p-t-t's) dealt a blow to PCC so destructive that it has proved impossible to undo its damaging consequences even after PCC has been converted into a university. (Ironically, the woes of PCC were the handiwork of the Left-front government headed by Jyoti Basu; but the successor of Basu, Buddhadeb Bhattacharyya, an alumnus of Presidency, was instrumental in upgrading the college into a university — an act that some members of his party, especially the t-t-p's and p-t-t's, could not have liked.)

So far as the economics department's troubles were concerned, an adequate appreciation of them in the 1980s requires some knowledge of developments in the department during the 60s and 70s. In the early 1960s, the economics department received handsome library grant and financial support from the University Grants Commission (UGC) for instituting a number of posts of teacher fellows enabling them to undertake full-time research for Ph.D; two junior research fellows (JRFs), (meant for good students who had just received their MA degree); and visiting fellows (meant for well established economists who would spend a year or so at the Centre for Economic Studies constituted within the economics department to coordinate the activities under the UGC scheme. When I joined the department in 1965, Tapas Majumdar was the head, and with Dipak Banerjee as its director, CES was functioning like a well-oiled machine. The UGC's financial support to the department, I gathered from Tapasbabu, was the result of the extremely favourable opinion of Lord Lionel Robbins (known all over the world for his