

## A TALE OF TWO PRESIDENCIES

A delightful coincidence led to Professor Sugata Bose and myself finding ourselves on the same flight from Kolkata to Chennai one fine morning in July 2011, but for widely different reasons. I was travelling to keep a medical appointment, while he was travelling to launch his book ‘His

merely that colleges teach undergraduate courses while universities teach postgraduates (a narrow enough definition since there are examples to the contrary both in India and abroad), but research is one of the major components of any good university. Presidency, in its glorious days of yore, was an excellent teaching institute tutored by dedicated outstanding teachers, but research had not been its forte. There have of course been a few internationally reputed singularities to lend credibility to the old adage that the exception proves the rule, but the College had never been a collective enterprise for research. In order to mould Presidency University into a world-class university, the first and foremost task is to create an atmosphere and ambience conducive to good teaching and research.

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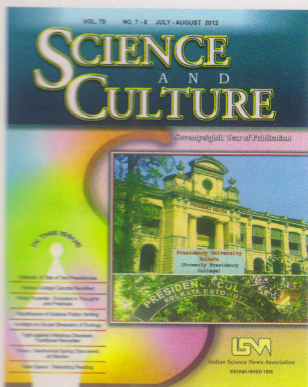
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I am not comfortable with the idea of according ‘special status’ to Presidency University, a hot topic of

discussion for some time. In my opinion, one has to demonstrate qualifications to deserve something ‘special’ that extends beyond its celebrated pedigree. Conferring ‘special status’ on the basis of Presidency’s past performance is akin to encouraging an academic caste system, a practice that most will agree is unfair. However, Professor Bose’s justification is not without its own logic.



*Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle Against Empire*, to be followed by a conversation with Shri Gopal Krishna Gandhi, former Governor of West Bengal.

Sugata Bose, the Gardiner Professor of History at Harvard University, has recently become a household name in West Bengal because of his role as Chairman of the Presidency Mentor Group formed to shape the future of his alma mater. My conversation started tentatively with *Science and Culture*, a journal that he was well aware of, but gradually drifted towards his mission and vision of the revival of the past glory of Presidency College (now Presidency University). Our half-hour discussion gave me enough food for thought on this issue.

First of all, one needs to understand that colleges and universities are conceptually two different entities. It is not

He explained that the pay-scale and benefits in state universities are lower than those at central universities, including the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). In order to attract talent, particularly from abroad, it is important to provide better, if not the best, salary. Presidency being a state university, cannot deviate from the stipulated pay structure unless a 'special status' is granted by the central government to allow them to offer higher benefits to its teachers.

'Special status' is a kind of privilege, and as such should be granted only to the deserving. To maintain fairness, privileges must then also flow to those missionary colleges that have been able to maintain their standards and respectability in the wake of a less-than-stellar academic atmosphere, a common canard used by Presidency College to defend its academic decline in the last couple of decades. Privilege does not necessarily mean additional material or monetary assistance—it could also be granted by affording more autonomy, including freedom in selecting students, recruiting teachers and framing the syllabus. In the name of democracy and socialism, we sometimes create a mechanical set of frameworks that produce run-of-the-mill products of mediocre quality instead of inspiring the best. Over time, democratic methods in our country have resulted in a process that gives equal chance to everyone irrespective of their merit. Instituting rotational headship of university departments for fixed periods from professor to lecturer is an illustration of such misguided policies.

Another problem that I observe in educational and research institutes, at least in West Bengal, is that teachers live in their own insular ivory towers. There is a lack of open environment where teachers can meet together to discuss issues that could broaden the intellectual horizon of each of the participants, commonly known as 'adda'. Many institutions lack even a proper canteen or faculty club where teachers can meet for lunch, which could promote social interaction and provide food for thought.

Bringing in talented teachers is relatively easy—it is more difficult to keep them motivated and focused on their research and other scholarly pursuits. It is said that a government organisation recruits the best candidates but destroys their performance over the years, while private organisations often recruit the mediocre but create a competitive environment that grinds them to over-achievement. The former is a direct result of institutional apathy—absence of a proper environment for productivity, dearth of motivation and encouragement, and lack of

recognition and reward for the achiever.

We need a group of intelligent teachers in every department who can exchange views on their own subjects as well as encourage inter-disciplinary discussions. Many bright minds who return from abroad have their dreams dashed when faced with a workplace that is stale from intellectual inertness, an environment that does not offer interaction at the same cerebral level, and a culture of isolation from fellow-researchers. In addition, bureaucracy and indifference of the general staff towards teachers make the entire system frustratingly slow. This results in some teachers returning to their earlier positions, others expend strenuous efforts for a job change, while the remaining few accept the situation as their destiny and continue.

Whether money can buy talent is an open question. The lives of great teachers of Bengal like J.C. Bose, P.C. Ray, C.V. Raman, M.N. Saha, S.N. Bose, K.S. Krishnan and others teach us the importance of academic atmosphere and research facilities over personal material gain. It also begs the rhetorical question if Presidency College teachers were really that well paid during its earlier heydays.

Rabindranath Tagore was one of the first Indians to suggest that not only should there be wider opportunities for education across the country, but that the school atmosphere should also be attractive to students. The time has now come to make educational institutions attractive to teachers as well. The environment must be lively and satisfying so that teachers enjoy going to the workplace. Universities, in particular, need an atmosphere for vibrant intellectual activities where teachers can interact, learn and contribute. This relates not only to infrastructure (like an up-to-date library, well-equipped laboratories, modern classrooms with appropriate audio-visual facilities and good computational facilities with internet), but also an environment that stimulates intellectual discussion. A small pool of talented teachers is not sufficient for a university to succeed—what is needed is to reach a critical mass of such persons for an institute's long-term survival and progress.

All these only help the young minds (real students) to open up and evolve in an atmosphere of freedom of opinions and ideas.

We are all eagerly waiting to see Presidency University emerge not only as one of the best universities of the nation, but evolve into a unique institute where students and teachers will rush from all corners of the world—not because of its 'special status', but because of the merit of courses that it offers. □

*S.C. Roy*

The article in a slightly different form has been published in the Sunday Statesman dated 29 July 2012.