

Presidency teachers dared Naxal violence and taught students, says Jawhar Sircar

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At 65, one may just about qualify for the minimal seniority required to pontificate and recall bits of nostalgic memories of one's alma mater. My undergraduate years (1969-1972), which were extended by another 14 painful months, were certainly among the darkest in the history of the college. Life was bleak, dangerous and very uncertain when I joined the institution and a pall of despair had gripped the college, the educational environment of the state and Bengal as a whole.

Naxalism was at its peak and violence was endemic, as State power fought back, rather clumsily, resulting in frequent urban guerrilla wars in and around the campus and in unfortunate deaths and destruction. Comrade Mao's huge portraits were everywhere, in our classrooms and on walls, and provocative, incendiary slogans declaring extra-territorial loyalties to China occupied every square foot of available space.

By 1970, however, it was clear that it was one more reign of terror that had gripped the college under some romantic garb of a China-inspired revolution.

I recall how our classes were interrupted at will and the college shut down at sporadic intervals, which meant that we lost irretrievable academic months and years. But Presidency is Presidency and some teachers dared the violence and gave us tutorials in their rooms at considerable risk and others (God bless their souls!) took makeshift classes in their homes.

This 'nadir' in Presidency's long life was soon over but I chose to mention the dark days during its bicentenary celebrations: Lest we forget that the institution had passed through both good and bad times, and has to be prepared for more of either.

And, I carry another baggage: Having served as the principal secretary of the higher education department of the state, which was for no fault of mine. I remember that stage of my salaried existence as a never-ending struggle with a regime that had taken a vow to flatten the college's tall standing to ensure some misconceived 'equality' with other colleges, instead of pulling them up.

I must compliment the then chief minister for helping me ward off the anti-Presidency brigade, even though I was soon 'smoked out' of West Bengal to Delhi.

He genuinely supported 'autonomy' for this and other colleges like St Xavier's. I remember drafting the Committee on Autonomy for Presidency and getting it signed by a sullen minister, a good soul, who kept on mumbling about 'elitism'.

I had to take more than just a healthy interest in its business, lest the 'evil eye' harm it. But I have no first-hand knowledge thereafter about Presidency University, which was created during my

exile.

As the first college in India, Presidency had some natural advantages of the first-born male child in an Indian family, but its excellence lay as much in academics as in nurturing certain virtues of challenging established ideas.

This genetic trait was first evident in its post natal stage in 1827-28, when the Derozians openly contested the values of the very upper-class, upper caste Hindus who had created the college and then governed it for their own benefit.

After all, fresh ideas and systems can only arrive when some pioneers take the lead as several students and teachers in this College have done: To break free from the comfortable but constricting adjustment with either the ecosystem of governance or of ideas.

(Jawhar Sircar is a retired civil servant. The views expressed are personal.)