

Restoring lost glory of Presidency College won't be easy

The who's who of Bengal went there to study, from Rabindranath Tagore to Satyajit Ray to Jyoti Basu to Amartya Sen. And now the 192-year-old Presidency College here is about to be bestowed a rare honour - university status. But many intellectuals, who are alumni of the hallowed institution and have seen its academic standards plummet over the years due to political interference, say a lot more needs to be done to restore its lost glory.

'Upgrading Presidency College to a university won't help until and unless there are quality professors and students. Recruitment of professors should be on the basis of merit and not on the basis of political influence,' said well-known poet Shankha Ghosh.

'An academic atmosphere free of unholy political interests should be encouraged so that the university becomes a melting pot of high class merit, so that the honour of this institute can be rebuilt,' Ghosh, a Presidency alumnus, told IANS..

Originally, it was called Hindu College and came to be rechristened as Presidency College in 1855. It was the college that cradled the Bengal renaissance in the 19th century. It went on to produce students who became legends in their respective spheres - social reformer Swami Vivekananda, scientist Satyendranath Bose, freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose to name a few.

Though Presidency, with around 2,500 students, still churns out talent, standards have fallen due to politics in teacher recruitment and frequent student unrest. There has also been a steady refusal on the part of the authorities to give it special treatment.

'Political influence by the ruling Left Front has dented the pride and glory of Presidency,' said Dipankar Dasgupta, noted economist and alumnus of the college.

'A section of the faculty at Presidency College doesn't deserve to teach in this institution. They are there because of their political links,' Dasgupta told IANS.

'Similarly, students should be admitted strictly on the basis of academic and not political merit.'

Several eminent professors have migrated to other institutions. Also, private universities provide better opportunities. For many meritorious students, the college no more holds the charm it once exuded.

Sukanta Chaudhuri, a renowned scholar of English literature and a Presidency alumnus, feels an apolitical system of recruitment should be evolved for the college so that the best brains can be brought in to teach.

'A completely new recruitment procedure should be implemented and existing faculty should also pass through it,' said Chaudhuri, also an ex-faculty of Presidency College who has now switched to Jadavpur University.

The demand for granting autonomous status to the college was first raised in the early 1970s by students, teachers and alumni.

But neither Congress chief minister S.S. Ray nor his Marxist successor Jyoti Basu, who headed the first five Left Front governments in Bengal from 1977 to 2000, could take a forward step.

Two education commissions set up by the Left Front government also recommended autonomy for the college, but the idea was stilled thanks to teachers' bodies affiliated to the ruling Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) that feared losing control over the college.

Ironically, the move to give the college university status is being spearheaded by none other than Marxist Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who himself is an alumnus. Things have started moving in the last few days with Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi giving his assent.

In the next few months, Presidency is expected to become a unitary university without - any right to have affiliate colleges - once the relevant bill is passed by the state assembly.

However, the going may not be smooth.

A top leader of Left-leaning West Bengal College and University Teachers Association (WBCUTA) made it clear that his organisation did not agree with the chief minister on the issue.

'It will not serve our purpose if Presidency is made a unitary university. All the government colleges in the state must be brought under it,' he said.

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