

## Calcutta Notebook

D R C

That time of the year is just over when parents of Higher Secondary qualifiers, obviously mauled at the entrance to professional portals, stood disconsolately in queues for buying admission forms from undergraduate colleges, and reflected on misspent lives. All agreed that the major mistake had been procreation. Surreptitiously, Mr A of this company started to withdraw a packet of smokes from his hind pocket, only to be admonished by a fat goddess, clad in a second film of clear, salty sweat on fair skin, and dark patches on cotton, "Can't you read the NO SMOKING sign? Are you blind?" The ideal answer would have been "No, and yes, in that order," but, the crumpled parent is a professional loser, and has 20/20 vision and does not even sprout sunglasses.

As the sun emerges from a light layer of cloud, a student, carrying a check list, dressed smartly in trousers and Panjabi, approaches the queue, followed by a retinue of young men, sniggering among themselves quite immoderately. He asks our protagonist, "Did you have anything to complain about." By this time, the sweat is standing out on Sri A's forehead in pearly drops, and he mumbles something which sounds like "part-payment."

"No, no! Only full payment is permitted" barks his interlocutor. As he starts to walk on, a member of the retinue whispers something to him. The metamorphosis of his countenance takes everyone in the queue by surprise. A flush of deep red surmounts the original mahogany and, out of this deep purple moonscape emerges an incredulous roar, "You don't want to pay the Students' Union membership fee?"

'No,no, "Mr A wanted to clarify the situation. "I am a bit short, and I wanted to pay the Union fees tomorrow."

"Why tomorrow for the Union fees? Why not for development fees, sports fees, tuition fees, session fees?"

He looked at his followers, but concluding rightly that nothing except derisive laughter and grunts of insult could be expected from these quarters, he answered his own question, "Because you are against our party which will form the union to-morrow. Your son will join our enemies tomorrow. We don't want him here today. Better, go elsewhere, sharp." Mr A started to follow Anirban, as shouts of "Anirban-da Jindabad", "Our great leader jindabad", "Our party jug jug jiyo" filled the portico in front of the library.

Mr A's son arrived, presumably with the balance, for he beckoned back his father. It appeared further that there was some uncertainty regarding the vernacular language, and Mr A repaired to an almost deserted desk marked ENQUIRIES(Vice Principal) at which sat a senior teacher and a clerk. After reading the mark sheet, the teacher handed it to the clerk. Apparently the university had sent a circular on the subject, but the accountant had locked it in

his desk, and was absent today owing to a malfunctioning tummy. The vice principal smiled at Mr A. "No problem," he said, " Anirban knows the Union decision.". By this time, of course, Mr A knew that Anirban's interpretation of the circular was what mattered, not the actual intention. This was an important point, for any ambiguity in the procedure for admission afforded Anirban byways for admitting his own loyalists. Let us leave Mr A to his own devices. Anirban has power and brawn, but Mr A hasn't ripened to his age without learning a trick or two of his own.

In college after college, people find that the admission process is in the full control of the Anirban-da-s of the students' union. In fact, this is one of the reasons why all local electoral parties are so deadly keen about their students' platforms winning the union. He admits who wins. Again, to win is easier if the newly admitted overwhelmingly support you, and, so, we get a vicious circle.

The students' union elections have assumed the buzz, bustle, and violence of the hustings for the state assembly or the parliament, so much so that supervision by the Election Commission is a serious practical question being discussed and debated by concerned bodies.

The observer learns early on that the task of the students' union is to keep flying the banner of the dominant political party, and admission means recruitment into that party, albeit its students' wing. The college administration either relinquishes control over admissions or actively follows the instructions of the union. If you have the temerity to try free and fair admissions, at least freer and fairer ones, you will be swamped by partisan violence. There is no guarantee that in your case the political authorities will ask the police to arrest the ringleaders even if they belong to the dominant party.

What about common students? Why do they accept forced partisanship, absence of a real administration, rules to be made or broken according to the whims of 'leaders', violence, absence of standards and cancellation of classes ? Coercion, the easy answer, is hardly sufficient to describe the complicated patron-client relation between the union and common students.

Also, it would be simple-minded to try to explain the situation only in terms of political interference, audacity, power hunger, and the capture and quarantine of new voters. At the heart of the rapid devaluation of college education lies the profound indifference of common students to all matters of the college, except issue of the admit card for the university examinations.

From high school, students are taught by their tutors and guardians to ignore content and meaning and divide up the syllabus into capsules "important for the examinations", ingest in the memory selected capsules which are more probable than the remainder, and regurgitate what falls 'common' on the answer paper. Classroom teaching rapidly becomes redundant. The level of the 'encapsulated' education cannot but be poor to mediocre, and even those who get high marks finish school and college with alarming gaps in their understanding and fundamental knowledge. Many teachers have sounded warning bells. Nobody listened, till people like

Narayanmurthy became worried about the standard of IIT students, and Jas Pal lamented of the stifling of creativity at school level, which has severely affected the quality of research in science and technology.

In suburban (or,urban, for that matter) colleges, the vacuum left by the loss of relevance of classroom education has been filled by union business. It is too flattering for these largely mercenary proceedings to be described as political activity. This state is no stranger to a real involvement of students in political movements. The intensity of conviction in a cause, sincerity of purpose, serious study of political questions, solidarity with the toiling people, and self-sacrifice seen in the seventies contrasts starkly with present-day campus violence, ruled by self-interest and led by bullies. □□□