A Footloose Academic

0. First Word

In writing this memoir I'm guided by a principle my first ever editor taught me: when you write, remember that it is for others to read, not for your own pleasure. Samar Sen, the famed Bengali poet who gave up poetry early in life, was in the mid 1960s editing a weekly named *Now*. He was going over a small article on computers in relation to employment I was asked to write by Ashok Mitra, my senior colleague at the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta (IIMC), closely associated then with *Now*. The context was a strike by the employees of the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) in response to the then projected computerization of all data in LIC files. I watched how Samar Sen reshaped sentences in the draft, written jointly with Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, replacing some of the phrases like 'at astronomical speed' with 'fast' and removing unneeded adjectives everywhere so that the writing looked different but elegantly simple.

Although I'd written a few pieces for *Frontier*, a weekly that Samar Sen edited after the collapse of *Now* (following his disagreement on editorial policy with Humayun Kabir the owner of the journal, then a minister at the centre in Delhi), I can't say I'd ever mastered that principle of writing: do it for your readers. I should add that it isn't easy to write in the simple prose style of a Samar Sen, The difficulty lay in the requirements for two different kinds of writing I'd been doing then - and ever since - in my career. Writing for professional journals requires strict adherence to specified norms – that finally make it opaque to all but those who do similar writing. Paul Samuelson, the great 20th century economist, is reported to have said that economists write basically "for mutual applause". That neatly sums up the nature of academic writing in more than one sense: opacity and exclusiveness that are often inseparable.

However, an association with the *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) and my contributions to that journal had enabled me to bridge the gap to some extent, but certainly not wholly as some readers of the EPW have been telling me over the years. The terseness in my style even in the short occasional editorial pieces I wrote for the EPW (despite much help from Krishna Raj, the editor of that journal) originates also in my unhappy

experiences with professional journals. Let me give you an example: I give a lengthy and a wholly – for me – satisfying proof of some proposition in a paper submitted to such a journal.. Here is a typical reply that comes from the referees and an associate editor: “The proof can be omitted. Say instead it’s evident that conditions a b c hold, and the proof that x y z are true follows easily”. So, a whole section of my draft goes out – or else the paper itself vanishes forever. Terseness and economy become second nature to writers in certain type of academic journals.

Here, I’ve an additional difficulty in writing a memoir. Should I say in full what I really felt about people and places; should I attempt full reviews of the Institutions I worked in from different angles: academic, organizational, interpersonal, and so on? I mention this because a friend who read my brief notes on the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) suggested that I should say very much more on the successes and failures of that body. Likewise my brief description of events at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) led to the inevitable remark that more, much more, has to be said. I agree. But this is my personal memoir and my life and work in the different academic centres and not about those institutions.

Finally this is not intended for publication. It’s for circulation among some members of my family and a few others: former colleagues and students, and friends of longstanding, who already know a lot about my life and may still enjoy the stories – some of them new to some readers - I recount now. So I ignore to some extent that editorial dictum about writing for others: surely writing for friends can be relatively rule-free. This is stuff for those close to me over decades. It’s also for my granddaughters Ananya and Inara, who after reading these memoir years from now would know more about their “Tata” than they do now as children.

Postscript

This memoir virtually stops with 1979 when I left the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum. In fact, I worked later in other institutions: mainly the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (1979/89) and the Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad (1989/1997) for fairly long periods; but also for a brief period at the

Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies, Trivandrum (1998/99). The simple reason why I hadn't written more about these centres is that I lost steam along the way, with extreme reluctance to continue this regurgitation. So a big gap remains here. But I made it up to some extent in the last section - on my work - with occasional references to the three centres.